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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Anthony LaRusso
Conducted by Richard B. Verrone, Ph.D.
February 17, 24; March 3, 2005
Transcribed by Shannon Geach**

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

1 Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone; I'm conducting an oral history interview with
2 Mr. Anthony LaRusso. Today is February 18, 2005. I am in Lubbock, Texas on the campus of
3 Texas Tech University in the Vietnam Archive interview room. Mr. LaRusso is in Angola, New
4 York. The time is approximately 1:16 PM Central Standard Time. Mr. LaRusso, why don't we
5 begin with some biographical information on yourself? Can you tell me when you were born,
6 where you were born and a little bit about your childhood?

7 Anthony LaRusso: I was born actually in a hospital in Buffalo, New York, which is 20 miles
8 from my home in Angola. My childhood was spent here in Angola growing up in an area that was
9 mainly a resort, right on Lake Erie and also a farming area. My first job as a young fellow was
10 working on the farm, picking beans and strawberries and things like that, mainly agricultural at that
11 time. This was back in the early '40s.

12 RV: What was the size of Angola?

13 AL: Angola was a community of about 9,000 or 10,000 people. Most of the people worked
14 at Bethlehem Steel, which was close by. At that time they had some 20,000 employees.
15 Bethlehem Steel was tremendous. Since then it's fallen on hard times. Most of the families
16 worked there, made a good wage, put their kids through school. There was a lot of immigrants at
17 that time, mainly Italian, Polish, and they settled in this area.

18 RV: Your folks are Sicilian, is that correct?

19 AL: Right, both of them.

20 RV: Tell me a little bit about them. What kind of folks were they?

1 AL: My dad was in World War I. What was interesting about that was in order to become
2 a citizen, he went into the service. When he came out he was automatically granted citizenship.
3 He never took a test or anything. That's what they did in those days. My mom through the years,
4 she was atypical Italian housewife, she stayed home with the kids. There were seven of us. We
5 had a large garden behind our house. We grew strawberries, raspberries, grapes. My father used
6 to make wine, homemade wine of course. It's an Italian tradition to make like two barrels of wine a
7 year. Anybody who came over had a glass of wine. That's the way they were. We didn't have a
8 lot of money, we had our own chickens that we ate and everything came from them. So we were
9 like little farmers. Went to local schools and I was lucky later on to go to college, which I was the
10 first one in my family to go to college.

11 RV: What did you father do, exactly?

12 AL: My father was a bricklayer and a stonemason.

13 RV: Was it basically blue collar and working everyday?

14 AL: Yes. He started at Bethlehem Steel and then he went into business for himself. He
15 would get a job and he'd go out and do fireplaces and patios and things like that.

16 RV: Did he ever talk to you about his experience in the war?

17 AL: Yes. Well the funny thing was, we had neighbors that mostly were all Sicilian/Italian.
18 They'd come over to the house and talk. They would talk about the war and everything and who
19 they liked and they loved FDR. They liked Harry Truman. They had their heroes. Of course FDR
20 was the one that started Social Security and a lot of them went on Social Security later on, that's all
21 they had. My father never had a pension. When he retired at 65 he lived on Social Security and a
22 small veteran's pension from World War I, that's all he had. He never had...he was self-employed.
23 So I wouldn't say we were real poor, but we didn't have a lot. Yet my father made money; he was
24 the only one in the whole neighborhood that could drive a car.

25 RV: Really? Why is that?

26 AL: Yes. My father, in order to get to work, he was self-employed, he had to have a
27 vehicle. We always had a vehicle. If somebody got sick in the neighborhood, they'd load him in
28 my dad's Model A and they'd drive him to the doctor. As a kid I remember those kinds of things.
29 The other thing I remember after World War II, my two brothers were both in the service, and they
30 came home. As a kid I was like seven or eight years old and I could still remember the celebration
31 that went on after VJ Day and VE Day. Me, as a young kid I was just enthralled by this, by these

1 guys coming home. I remember my mother having stars in the window. In those days we had
2 these stars in your window that meant that two sons were in the service. If one got killed then you
3 had a gold star. It was such an honor to be in the service. I mean you got drafted or you enlisted.
4 That was big!

5 RV: Tell me about...you have six siblings, you said.

6 AL: Yes.

7 RV: Tell me your ages, where were you in that mix?

8 AL: I was the youngest son and I have a sister younger than me. So I would have been
9 six out of seven. The two older brothers that like I said were in World War II, my father was in
10 World War I. My sisters, believe this or not, everybody they married were veterans. They were all
11 in the service, but my one brother-in-law he was in the Navy. My other brother-in-law was in the
12 Army. My other brother-in-law was in the Army. Our family was like...we were military. We're not
13 generals and colonels and stuff we were all enlisted. None of us were officers [drafted], but we all
14 took this for granted that you had to go into the service. It was never a thought of saying 'No, I
15 want to take off for Canada,' which is about 15 miles away from my house. A lot of people did that
16 to get away from the draft. You got drafted. So I was going to college at the time when I got
17 drafted.

18 RV: So there was a very large military tradition in your family?

19 AL: Yes.

20 RV: Huge. Were you thinking, 'Ok, I want to do this as well,' or were you thinking, 'No...'?

21 AL: No, my original intent was going to college and by the way I was a history major and
22 becoming a teacher, a high school teacher. I went to a Jesuit college in Buffalo called Canisius. I
23 was full time for three years then I switched to nights because it was getting expensive. My dad
24 was paying my tuition, which at that time was \$850.00 a year.

25 RV: Wow!

26 AL: So my dad would come up with the tuition. We didn't have student aid and that stuff
27 in those days. Unless you got a scholarship you were on your own. So I switched to nights. I was
28 going Tuesdays and Thursday nights and Saturday mornings. I worked in the grocery store a full
29 time job. That's the way I was doing and all of a sudden it was like an unwritten law at the time. If
30 you were 23 years old, you were not married, you got drafted if you were physically able. That was

1 the criteria back in the '60s. So I got my draft notice in November of '61. I was 2-S up to that time
2 which would have been student. I got a deferment.

3 RV: Tony, do you mind before we go there can I ask you a couple of questions about your
4 childhood before we go there?

5 AL: Sure.

6 RV: A couple about your brothers in World War II. Did they talk about their experiences;
7 did you ask them about what they had done?

8 AL: Yes, we had a lot of talks and the funny part of it is our neighborhood was large
9 families. A lot of the boys were all in the service. I can remember my neighbors; they were either
10 drafted or enlisted in World War II. They started at the VFW in the community here. My dad
11 belonged to a club called the Last Man's Club [at the American Legion] A legion and every year he
12 would go to a dinner and they'd have a bottle of wine from World War I and the last person would
13 drink the wine. My dad was sixth from the end when he died. He was 81. I remember him putting
14 that Legion cap on and going. Today I belong to a Legion because my brothers did and my dad,
15 everybody did.

16 RV: Your brothers were in the Army?

17 AL: My brother Jim was in the Army Air Corps. The Army Air Corps, which was the
18 predecessor of the Air Force. He was a tech sergeant. My bother Sam was with General Patton.

19 RV: Really?

20 AL: They were both in Europe and they both saw action. They were right in the middle of
21 it.

22 RV: Right, are they still alive today?

23 AL: My brother Jim passed away at 75. My brother Sam is still alive, he's 81. He's in
24 pretty tough shape. He's got a lot, well one of the biggest things is that he won't quit smoking.
25 Just wasting away to nothing. He's got a tumor in his lung and he refuses to quit smoking.

26 RV: Do you all ever talk about the war experiences now?

27 AL: Yes, we kid around a lot. My brother will talk about Vietnam and say, 'Well that's not
28 a war, that was a skirmish,' (laughter). We have a lot of interplay between us about the service.
29 The service, the military was a big part of our lives yet.

30 RV: Yes and I know it was for Italian-Americans and showing like your father did the
31 citizenship. Showing that I'm a citizen as well and I'm going to fight for my country and so forth.

1 Obviously your generation and in the family that carried forth. Was your mother supportive of
2 military service in your family?

3 AL: Yes, I can remember my mother getting letters and crying. It was very traumatic for
4 her to have two sons who were both in at the same time. It was traumatic for her.

5 RV: What do you remember about World War II besides your brothers being there? What
6 do you remember most?

7 AL: Well, World War II like I told you I can still vividly remember VJ Day and VE Day. All
8 they did was celebrate with people at our house and a guy playing the accordion and drinking wine.
9 All the neighbors over there they were all happy the boys came home. When the boys came
10 home, which is opposite of when I came home they had their uniforms on. They wore their
11 uniforms for like three or four days after they came home. I can remember the celebration. The
12 people were so happy to see the war over and those boys home. I was just the opposite, I came
13 home all alone.

14 RV: What was your opinion of Truman and Eisenhower as a young man coming up
15 through middle school and junior high at that time? Do you remember these presidents?

16 AL: Yes, I do. Harry Truman was an idol in our house. He was another one the way he
17 acted, how tough he was. The things that he accomplished when he was in there. Plus the
18 biggest thing is a lot of people don't know this, but the service at that time was segregated. He
19 actually desegregated the service. In World War II there was a lot of segregation. Well when I
20 went to Vietnam there wasn't. We had black guys in our outfit and everybody got along really
21 good. It was unbelievable how we got along because we were like united. There was no
22 discrimination.

23 RV: Truman broke that barrier.

24 AL: Right, he was the one. Later on my biggest idol believe it or not, was John Kennedy.
25 When I was a kid I liked this guy.

26 RV: You were in high school when he was...?

27 AL: Yes, I actually worked on his campaign. I was about 18 or 17 years old. I went
28 around putting up signs. Then when I got my draft notice guess whose name was on it?

29 RV: Your friend John Kennedy.

30 AL: John Kennedy. Then when I'm over in Vietnam, guess who gets killed?

1 RV: Your friend John Kennedy. What about General Eisenhower? What was your
2 opinion of him as president?

3 AL: Eisenhower...as I grew up, he was a great general. As I read books about him later
4 on I found out mainly a staff man. He was never a front-liner. He wasn't a general like Omar
5 Bradley. Omar Bradley was loved by the troops. He was the general's general, they used to call
6 him. The other general, Patton those guys were on the lines. My brother actually saw Patton, he
7 was there. He was on the job. Eisenhower was always staff man. He was a planner and stuff. He
8 wasn't really a front-line type of general, which I always liked that type of general. I wanted to see
9 that guy right here with me in the front lines.

10 RV: What do you remember about the Cold War and what you were hearing and learning
11 as a young man?

12 AL: The Cold War; I remember we were in high school when the blockade in Cuba. That
13 was a big thing. Korea, you know Korea because there were quite a few guys around here that
14 were drafted and went to Korea. The Cold War was the Communism part and that came after the
15 Korean part of it. Then all of a sudden people were against Communism. That was our big enemy
16 at the time.

17 RV: Do you remember your teachers in high school talking about Communism, about the
18 Soviet Union?

19 AL: Yes, they talked about Communism.

20 RV: Do you remember, would you all practice the duck and cover?

21 AL: Yes, we went through all that phase II of air raid. I can still remember as a child the
22 air raids that used to happen during the war when the lights were all off.

23 RV: During the Second World War?

24 AL: Right. Second World War, they'd have a drill and they had like the Civil Air Patrol,
25 these people used to go up in these towers and look for planes. They did that after II. The Civilian
26 Defense, which was big. Every township had a Civil Defense director; it was volunteers that used
27 to help this guy plan in case we ever got attacked. Then the bomb shelters later on, too. So the
28 country at that time, they were fearful of what could happen.

29 RV: Tell me about the emphasis on education in your household. Was that something
30 that your parents wanted you to be in school, stay in school?

1 AL: Yes. My older brothers and sisters never got the opportunity to finish school, the older
2 ones.

3 RV: Are you talking about college or high school?

4 AL: High school. I think three of my sisters graduated from high school. None of my
5 brothers did. They went out and worked and they went into the service when they 18 years old.
6 They were young fellows. My one brother, when he came home under the GI Bill, he went to
7 carpenter school. He got to be a carpenter. As life went on he became a pretty good
8 cabinetmaker and stuff. He was pretty good. The other brother was a tile setter. He used to put
9 tiles in your bathroom or something like that. He was self-employed.

10 RV: You said you were the first to go to college?

11 AL: Right.

12 RV: Well before we go to Canisius, tell me about what was high school like for you? Tell
13 me about how you were as a student, were you into athletics? What kind of friends did you run
14 around with?

15 AL: I was sort of short. I was like I would say about 5'2" or 5'3" in high school. I did go out
16 for football and was third string quarterback. I ran track, I ran the mile. I loved basketball, but I
17 was too short for it. I played intramurals and stuff like that. I loved sports. I used to write the
18 sports page for our local school paper. I used to go to all the games and I never missed basketball
19 or football games. I wrote for the school paper. To this day I still love sports.

20 RV: What kind of student were you?

21 AL: The courses that I loved were history, social study, courses like that I got straight A's.
22 I had trouble with physics and math and algebra. The same everybody else did. My marks were –
23 I was about maybe a B student. I had fairly good marks. I was active in as I said the school paper
24 and had the lead in the senior play. I was involved in a lot of things.

25 RV: Why were you so good in social studies?

26 AL: I just had a love for history. I mean dates and events used to come to me. Kids in my
27 class would say, 'How the hell do you remember all that stuff?' I used to read a lot. I'd go to the
28 library. Most of my stuff the books I read were historical novels. Novels and any types of things
29 that happened.

30 RV: Why were you into this?

31 AL: I don't know. I just like history. I enjoyed history.

1 RV: What were your friends like? Who did you run around with?

2 AL: My friends were about on the same level that I was. Nobody that was like really rich
3 and had cars in high school. One or two guys had cars and we'd all jump in. We'd jump in a car
4 and we'd go to different events as a group. Most of the ones I hung around with were mainly in the
5 same position I was in. Like a family, mother and dad. In those days, people didn't get divorced.
6 Everybody had a mother and father that were around the house. So we didn't have a lot of
7 problems with what happens today when these couples break up and these kids are shuttled from
8 parent to parent or getting into trouble. I think that's one of the reasons. Plus we were very close
9 to our church. We belonged and I was an altar boy for five years.

10 RV: I assume Catholic?

11 AL: Pardon?

12 RV: Catholic?

13 AL: Yes. Our parents were strict Catholics and we had to go to Catechism and we had to
14 go to Mass on Sunday. That showed when I went to Vietnam because every Sunday I'd go to
15 Mass. There was a Vietnamese church in the village and I'd go over there because there were a
16 lot of Catholics in Vietnam.

17 RV: What kind of job did you have in high school? You said you worked on Kennedy's
18 campaign, but what other types of jobs did you do?

19 AL: I worked mainly in grocery stores. I worked for A&P, which was a big chain in those
20 days. They were all over the country. There was a union; they had a union. I was making like two
21 bucks an hour and boy that was big bucks. Believe me! I thought that was really something to get
22 a job at the A&P. I worked after school and I worked summers. I had to work because we didn't
23 have much money. If I wanted to go out or anything I had to make my own money. That's how I
24 grew up. My whole family is like that too. We all worked, nobody sat around the house, I'll tell you
25 that.

26 RV: What years were you in high school, '60?

27 AL: '52 to '56. I graduated in '56 from Lake Shore.

28 RV: Ok, '52 to '56.

29 AL: Then I waited a year because then again I didn't have any money. Then I started
30 college actually '57, September of '57, I started at Canisius.

1 RV: Tell me about the decision to go to Canisius – to go to college actually in general.
2 You said you were the first one. Was that your own internal fire driving you that way or was
3 everybody encouraging you to go?

4 AL: Well, I had teachers in high school that thought I should go to college. I can
5 remember this English teacher Mr. Burns; he sat me down one day and he said, 'You know you
6 should go to college and I want you to write a letter and apply to Canisius or wherever you want to
7 go.' Canisius was probably the closest because St. Bonaventure was quite a ways away. Niagara,
8 the other Catholic school, was kind of far away. So Canisius was the shortest place that I could go
9 to. I didn't have a car in those days so I would take a bus, a Greyhound bus into Buffalo. That's
10 how I started school. When I was at Canisius I had two years of ROTC.

11 RV: Was that voluntarily?

12 AL: At Canisius College, they didn't have a phys ed program. So the only other thing you
13 could take would be ROTC. You had to take a physical to get into it. Now, you had to take two
14 years of it. You got credit for it. If you wanted to stay in and go onto be an officer, you had to go
15 four years. Then you had to go to summer camp between your junior and senior year.

16 RV: You opted for which route?

17 AL: I just took the two. So that's what happened there. That was my first exposure to
18 actually military. I mean we had uniforms and we had drills. We took courses and we studied
19 military history. We took the great battles and the great wars and stuff like that.

20 RV: Did you enjoy it?

21 AL: Pardon?

22 RV: Did you enjoy it?

23 AL: Yes, very much so.

24 RV: So that was not a foreign culture for you?

25 AL: No. In fact when I went to Basic Training the sergeant said, 'Did any of you have
26 ROTC?' I raised my hand and he made me a squad leader.

27 RV: Wow, right off the bat. Do you remember what kind of music you were listening to
28 and kind of your social life? What was that like for you then?

29 AL: Well, rock and roll was just starting.

30 RV: Yes.

1 AL: Elvis Presley, and all the teen, Frankie Avalon. In those days Paul Anka, Frankie
2 Avalon and Jerry Lee Lewis, they used to go on tour. We had a roller rink in Angola and those
3 guys all came here. It cost us a buck to get in and that's the guys that we saw in person.
4 Television was just starting, too. All those big stars would come to these little towns and they'd fill
5 up the whole roller rink with 400 or 500 screaming kids.

6 RV: Who did you see?

7 AL: Frankie Avalon, Paul Anka; Jerry Lee Lewis broke the piano. Yes, he was pounding
8 on the piano so much he broke it. There was quite a few that just came through. I saw Connie
9 Francis, Bobby Darin, who they just made a movie about. Spacey, Kevin Spacey just made a
10 movie about him. But he was a big star in those days. Now they're discovering this guy. My God,
11 he was a big star in those days.

12 RV: That's interesting. Tell me about college life for you outside of ROTC; what was it like
13 academically?

14 AL: College, Jesuit schools are very, very strict. I mean you couldn't miss class. I marvel
15 at when my kids went to St. Bonaventure and two [one] of them went to state schools upstate at
16 Cobleskill. They used to skip classes. I used to say, 'We could never skip classes. You had to be
17 sick.'

18 RV: They actually admitted to you that they skipped classes? (laughs)

19 AL: Yes! They would tell me. The other thing was we had to wear suits. You had to wear
20 a suit everyday, tie. There was no liquor on the campus, no beer and stuff like that. You had to go
21 to a campus bar to get a beer. I go down there, I went to Bonnie to visit my kids a couple years
22 ago and we're down in the bars on the campus drinking beer (laughs). I mean oh my God, what a
23 change!

24 RV: Do you think it's changed for the better or for the worst?

25 AL: I think the strictness was better. In the courses we took, the course they take today,
26 what a difference. I mean, oh my God. We had to take four years of Philosophy. Four years of
27 Theology. Then we had the history courses, oh my God, Diplomatic History, Constitutional Law
28 History. We took so many courses. These kids today, just the basics. It was tough. The Jesuits
29 are noted as the best teachers in the world. Kings have sent their children to Jesuit schools and
30 they're all over the world, in France, Germany, and Italy. The Jesuits are known all over the world

1 as teachers. To me these guys are so brilliant. They talked about history and they'd go to the
2 blackboard and write in Hebrew and write in Greek. I was just awed by these guys.

3 RV: What kind of student were you?

4 AL: College was tough. College was tough for me because I was a country boy and most
5 of the kids there were city boys. They went to a Catholic high school; they [I] never went to
6 Catholic high school. A lot of it was just going on to the next level, which was Canisius College. A
7 lot of them went to Canisius High School. It's still run by the Jesuits. I wasn't exposed to that
8 being from a public school, so it was tough. I was about a 'C' student, that's about all except for
9 the history. I did very well in history.

10 RV: So ROTC there you thought that was ok, you understood it, you felt comfortable with
11 that kind of lifestyle?

12 AL: Yes.

13 RV: Did you see yourself going forward into the military at this point or were you thinking I
14 need to graduate?

15 AL: No, I wanted to go be a teacher. I foresaw that I was going to go in the service.

16 RV: Why?

17 AL: The guys I grew up with they were like a year older than I and they got drafted.
18 Boom! They were in the service. So I expected myself to go in eventually. It was amazing. I see
19 the difference between my kids and what I went through. I knew I had to go into the service,
20 whether I got out of school or I dropped out of school whatever. I had to go in the service, as long
21 as I passed the physical. That's all you had to do. Today, they don't even think about it.

22 RV: What kind of difference do you think that makes?

23 AL: It gets me mad. My kids, my father-in-law was in World War II; he was a sergeant.
24 He was overseas, saw combat. So on both sides of our family, my two oldest brothers-in-law were
25 both in the service. I mean service was like part of your life. You had to go in the service. My kids
26 think nothing of it.

27 RV: What did it do for you?

28 AL: I'll tell you it gave me great discipline. Great discipline, even today. I still get up at
29 5:00 in the morning, every day, seven days a week. I am disciplined. The things that you have to
30 do, you've got to do this. Discipline carries on to my life. I pay my bills on time, never late with my

1 bills. I do everything, I pay my taxes. I do everything according to the discipline that I got from the
2 military.

3 RV: That stayed with you all your life?

4 AL: Right. Still, to this day.

5 RV: Tell me what happened with Canisius and then getting out early and not finishing.

6 AL: I was at Ft. Benning, we had the opportunity to take the University of Maryland
7 Extension courses for about thirteen bucks a credit hour. That was dirt-cheap. So I signed up for
8 this course and every Saturday when I was at Ft. Benning I would get my books and I would take
9 off for school. In this school were mainly officer's wives. So there I was a PFC and there were all
10 these officer's wives in there. A lot of people didn't take advantage of these extensions courses.
11 Most of your posts had those extensions courses. In fact, they even had them in Saigon, but I
12 wasn't there.

13 RV: That's right.

14 AL: So I couldn't take them. But it was cheap and it was subsidized and it was a way to
15 get some credits.

16 RV: This is after you're out of Canisius, you didn't graduate right?

17 AL: No.

18 RV: You finished there what in '60 is when you left, '61?

19 AL: No, I got drafted in '61. I appealed it. I went to the draft board and they let me stay
20 until January to finish because I was already signed up for three courses and I had paid my tuition.
21 I would have lost the money and the courses. So I took the three courses and then I passed the
22 three of them. Then right away.

23 RV: And you were in?

24 AL: Yes.

25 RV: Immediately you were in?

26 AL: Yes.

27 RV: This is in 1962?

28 AL: Two, right.

29 RV: '62. Were you happy with the Army? Did you want to go to the Marine Corps
30 possibly?

31 AL: No. Army tradition was it. Our family was Army.

1 RV: That's what I thought. So there was really no question.

2 AL: When my nephew signed up for the Marine Corps, we thought he was nuts.

3 RV: Tell me about your initial experiences there with the Army. You went to Ft. Jackson,

4 is that correct?

5 AL: Ft. Jackson for three days and then it was too crowded, so they shipped us down to

6 Ft. Gordon.

7 RV: That's where you did your Basic, at Ft. Gordon?

8 AL: Which actually could have been called Little Vietnam because it was almost exactly

9 the same as Vietnam, the sand and the heat. We went through that.

10 RV: What was Basic like for you? Tell me what you did.

11 AL: Basic was tough. It was tough. You got up early in the morning, you did your PT.

12 Now like I told you before, I was a miler in high school. You had to run. I had no trouble with that

13 exercise and the running. I wasn't in high school that long ago and I did well in the physical

14 aspects of it. I wasn't a big kid. I wasn't big. I mean, I had trouble with the hand-to-hand combat

15 trying to throw a guy who was 180 and I was about 140, kind of tough. I was always skinny. My

16 kids don't believe it, all the weight I've put on since then. I adjusted to it. I had no trouble. I know

17 there was quite a few guys who didn't adjust to it. They got rifted out. They went back home again

18 or they just didn't make it. Some will try anything to get out. I didn't think it was that difficult.

19 RV: What was the most difficult thing for you?

20 AL: No sleep in Basic. In Basic Training you're pulling KP and you're pulling guard duty.

21 When you hit that bunk, boy you were out. That was the toughest part of service, Basic Training.

22 You got all the discipline. Once you got into like Ft. Benning or Ft. Eustis, it was like an eight-hour

23 job. You went to classes and then you went home and you watched TV or you go down to the club

24 and shoot pool.

25 RV: What do you remember about Basic, what's the most memorable thing? What comes

26 to your mind, what do you see when you think about that?

27 AL: The biggest thing was you had to make yourself scarce because if you were lying

28 around the barracks and sergeant came in he'd say, 'Ok I want you to go do this and do that.' So

29 as soon as you were off-duty, you took off for the club or you went someplace to get away. You

30 couldn't get off post or anything so you had to stay there. Nobody had cars. So we'd go to movies

31 and stuff like that. We just kept away from the sergeants.

1 RV: What did you think about Georgia?

2 AL: It was a new experience for me being from the north. All of a sudden you're in this
3 heat. Of course that was good training for Vietnam because it was hot over there. But the thing
4 that I feared the most, believe this or not, was the snakes.

5 RV: Really?

6 AL: I hated snakes.

7 RV: Were you warned about them down there?

8 AL: Yes. They told us the different kinds of copperheads and coral snakes. The sergeant
9 killed a coral snake. I don't know if you ever saw a coral snake, they're kind of small. They can kill
10 you.

11 RV: Yes, they're one of the most poisonous snakes in the south.

12 AL: One day we were on a detail in all these pine trees, that's all there was down there
13 was pine trees. Me and this other fellow had to go dig these holes. They used to give you these
14 little jobs to do. So we're out there digging these holes and I see two snakes coming, rattlers.
15 They were big.

16 RV: They're coming at you?

17 AL: Yes! They're coming right at us. They weren't coiled up there. So me and this kid,
18 we took off. He was afraid of snakes too. The first thing, this carried on until we went to Vietnam.
19 The first thing they told us about the different snakes over there, they were mostly poisonous too.
20 That's one thing I always feared. I always looked at my boots at night to make sure no snakes had
21 crawled in, in the morning when I got up. We jumped in the foxhole when you had alert. A lot of
22 times there were snakes in those foxholes and they'd bite you if you jumped in there at night. So
23 you had to be careful.

24 RV: Do you remember any of the racial strife in the south there in Georgia? Did you see
25 anything like that going on?

26 AL: No, but when I was in Virginia at Ft. Eustis and like I said I was never... Well, there
27 were two incidents that I can remember at Basic Training. There was a kid from Lackawanna, Nick
28 Johnson, a black kid.

29 RV: Lackawanna, where?

30 AL: New York. That's real close to us. He got drafted and what a nice kid, a real nice kid.
31 Nick...we were coming home and we stopped it was either Virginia or West Virginia, I can't

1 remember. But we stopped to eat and the waitress, a white waitress came over and she said, 'I'll
2 serve you, but I won't serve him.' So we got up and walked out. We didn't know that up here. We
3 never faced that. So all of us stood up and we walked out with him. This was on our way home
4 from Basic Training. We saw that and then one night we were coming back, me and this kid from
5 Batavia, which isn't too far from Angola. We used to drive home on weekends because it wasn't
6 that far from Virginia, Buffalo. So we stopped in a bar going down there and it was a black bar.
7 We didn't realize this because we were never exposed to this. So we walked in there and all the
8 black people just kept staring at us like, 'What are you doing in here?'

9 RV: It was you and who else?

10 AL: Me and another kid from Batavia.

11 RV: He was white?

12 AL: Yes. It was new to us, all these things were new because over here we grew up with
13 black kids and a lot of Indian kids too because we lived close to the reservation up here. We just
14 never thought that they were any different than anybody else. The person that taught my father
15 bricklaying at Bethlehem Steel was a black man. He used to come over to our house; my father
16 would invite him over for spaghetti. He loved spaghetti. He'd walk in our house and the neighbors
17 would go nuts.

18 RV: Really?

19 AL: Yes.

20 RV: Wow!

21 AL: So we went all through high school with black kids and never had any trouble. There
22 was no such thing. Now in the city it was a little different. I think the city had more problems than
23 we had out in the suburbs. There wasn't that many black kids. In the service there was a lot of
24 black kids. Our sergeants were black, you know. That was my first experience with segregation
25 believe it or not in my life.

26 RV: So it struck you as very strange?

27 AL: It was strange, black bar – what do you mean? There was a bar over here and there
28 was black people in there.

29 RV: Tony, let me go on a tangent here just for a second if you'll indulge me. Tell me
30 about your mother's cooking and that good Italian food.

31 AL: Oh my God! My wife is Irish (laughter).

1 RV: Well be careful.

2 AL: My wife is Irish. But my mother...we still talk. We get together all us guys about the
3 dishes that our mothers made. Don't forget I told you that I was skinny. We had pasta, we had
4 chicken. We never had steak. We never had hamburgers. I mean a hamburger was a delicacy.
5 That's what we ate. A lot of seafood, every Friday we had fish. My mother could make pasta with
6 anything, cauliflower, asparagus. A hundred different ways. She canned her own foods. She
7 made her own ketchup. She made her own peaches. We had a little dugout underneath our
8 cellar, our porch. My father just dug it out by hand and there you have two barrels of wine and we
9 had apples and stuff that we had in the fall. We had them all during the winter. We had an icebox
10 but we didn't have no refrigerator in those days. You had an iceman. In our neighborhood, which
11 was mainly Sicilian like I said, we had these, well we called them hawkers. These guys would
12 come in their little vehicles and they'd have all kinds of Italian delicacies and cheese and olives.
13 That's the way we bought our stuff.

14 RV: Now as a Sicilian, what do you think about the *Godfather* movies? This family, the
15 Corleon family is Italian, any thoughts on that?

16 AL: My mother and father would talk to us about – they called it the Black Hand. They
17 never called it the mafia or the mob. They'd say it was the Black Hand. Believe it or not, the Black
18 Hand didn't have a very good reputation with the Sicilians because they would put pressure on
19 them to give them money; they were extortionists. When you mentioned the Black Hand they
20 feared them, the Black Hand. But by the same token they hated them. So there was no love for
21 the dons and that stuff that you see in the movies today. They glorify them, but not in Sicily.

22 RV: So was that part of your upbringing? Discussion about this part of Italian or
23 Sicilian...?

24 AL: No. The city had mob figures. I mean you'd read about it in the paper, certain people
25 that were in the mob, but where we lived there wasn't too many mobsters.

26 RV: Right. Angola was separated from that.

27 AL: Yes.

28 RV: Well back to Basic, tell me about...you finish up Basic and you're going to go off to
29 Virginia to Ft. Eustis, is that correct?

30 AL: Right to school.

1 RV: When you finished Basic did you know which direction you were going in as far as
2 your MOS in the Army?

3 AL: No, I had no idea. I had no idea.

4 RV: What did you want to do?

5 AL: I wanted to get into like a post newspaper because I told you I did some writing in high
6 school. I was pretty good in English and I thought I could get into like a post newspaper, which
7 every post had one. That's what I put in for. No, they sent me to...at that time the war was starting
8 to heat up in Korea in helicopters. So when I left I got sent to Ft. Eustis and I went to prop and
9 rotor school. There was about 20 people in the class from all over. Not because I was a great
10 mechanic, but because I was good at taking tests and I had some college, I became the first in my
11 class.

12 RV: This is at Ft. Benning?

13 AL: No, this was at Ft. Eustis.

14 RV: This was at Eustis, ok.

15 AL: Yes, four months of school, prop and rotor school. Then from there I had orders to go
16 to Ft. Benning which was very happy because I was permanent party cadre at Lawson Field and I
17 thought I would never have to go overseas. I thought I'd spend my last year there, but lo and
18 behold I got the orders and boom, I was gone.

19 RV: Tell me in 1962, there's a lot going on in the Cold War, specifically the Cuban Missile
20 Crisis and things like that. Tell me about your memories of that time.

21 AL: The memories were in '62 that they were concerned about the Cuban Missile Crisis.
22 Before I mentioned that I was in high school, no actually when I was in high school what happened
23 was when the American troops went behind the lines in Korea and they landed at where? Pusan?

24 RV: That was down south. They landed at In Chon.

25 AL: In Chon. That's when I was in school. I'm sorry. I misstated that before. We were
26 restricted to post during the times when anything was going on with the missiles, with the Cubans.
27 We were informed many times about what was going on there. That was big at that time.

28 RV: You're down south and this is October 1962, you're right there. How do you think
29 President Kennedy handled that?

1 AL: Well, you know I thought he did a good job. He stared them down. Of course that
2 whole thing with Castro, you've got to remember that the United States backed the administration
3 in Cuba at the time. There was a lot of investment, American investment in Cuba.

4 RV: Right, before Castro.

5 AL: Right, Castro was not looked up on as a figure that was going to help us. Which he
6 didn't. Don't forget we didn't exactly back him either. The Americans had gambling interests down
7 there and there was a lot of American money down there. This guy was going to be a radical and
8 we went against him.

9 RV: Tony, you want to take a break for just a moment?

10 AL: Sure.

11 RV: Tony, we're recording again. We were talking off the recording here about some of
12 the things about Angola and the area and the Indian population there. You were saying your dad
13 got along well with them?

14 AL: Yes.

15 RV: Tell me about that.

16 AL: He got along good because...did you ever hear of a gardoon?

17 RV: Yes.

18 AL: Well my dad used to go pick those. The best ones were on the reservation, for some
19 reason. So he would get permission to go on their property and pick those gardoons and get three
20 or four bushels of them and that was like a delicacy with the Italians. Around the holidays, that's
21 what you'd do. You froze the gardoon and you took them out of the freezer and then you served
22 them. You fried them with eggs or breaded them and stuff. That was a delicacy. But that was like
23 a weed. It was a weed. But that's what my dad would do. He would go on the reservation and
24 they didn't have the gas stations and the gambling casinos in those days. They had very, very few
25 stores. They couldn't drink on the reservation. They had to go off the reservation because it was
26 against the law. But we have a large contingent of Indians in just our area here. The Seneca.

27 RV: The Seneca.

28 AL: Yes, the Mohawks I think are up near Niagara Falls. There's quite a few. Being close
29 by, some intermarried with the different families. People actually moved on the reservation.

30 RV: Today, the Indian population you said you went to high school with probably more
31 Indian students than you did...

1 AL: Blacks.

2 RV: Black students. Is that the case now in Angola?

3 AL: Yes there's lot of Indians that go to our school, but most of them go to a school close
4 by called Gowanda, Gowanda Central. There's a lot of them that go there. They had their own
5 schools back in the old days, they were wards of the government. The government used to take
6 care of their education, their clinics everything.

7 RV: We were commenting just a few minutes ago about how the casino industry has just
8 catapulted.

9 AL: Oh my gosh, around here it's just amazing. People don't talk about going to Vegas
10 anymore. I mean you go 20 miles; you can go to a casino. The senior citizens, they have all kinds.
11 A lot of the bars have excursions to these casinos. You go all day, you jump on a bus you go
12 there, you eat there and everything.

13 RV: I can only imagine it's a huge business there.

14 AL: Yes.

15 RV: Well let's go back. Let me ask you some questions about Ft. Eustis in Virginia. You
16 said that was a four-week school on prop and propeller.

17 AL: Four months.

18 RV: I'm sorry, four-month school. Can you tell me about the curriculum, what did you
19 study? How was that introduced to you?

20 AL: In the beginning we studied the basic about flight, how a plane operates, how a
21 helicopter operates. Then you went into specifics like the hydraulic system, the engine system.
22 You basically touched on those and then you went into your chosen MOS, which was prop and
23 rotor repair. So that's when you actually worked on a prop or worked on a rotor blade.

24 RV: How did that come to you? Was it difficult or was it easy to pick up for you?

25 AL: Well, I'm not a mechanically-minded person. That part was hard, but the tests were
26 easy. My memory was good and we had like a test every week. So the result was I came first in
27 my class but I wasn't certainly the most mechanically-minded person in the class. There were
28 people that certainly were better mechanically than I was. But I was good at the tests.

29 RV: Did you enjoy this kind of work? Is there where you saw yourself going in the Army or
30 were you just basically fulfilling your requirement and then you'd get out and move on?

1 AL: Right. I mean I never thought I would go into that field when I got out. A lot of the
2 guys that were drafted and served with me in Vietnam were draftees that worked in the aircraft
3 industry. Like in Connecticut and Massachusetts and one kid was from New Jersey. He worked
4 for Flying Tigers. These guys were all drafted.

5 RV: What did you think of the draft? I know you have talked about the positive things
6 about being in the military, the discipline, etc. But what did you think about the government drafting
7 its citizens? At that point in your life, in '62 or '63 did you have a problem with it?

8 AL: No, I didn't have a problem because that was the way of life. My brothers were
9 drafted. That's the way things were. And if you didn't go, you were a draft dodger. I knew guys
10 that were certainly more physically more able than me that didn't have to go for one reason or
11 another. They just never had to go and to me they were just lucky, that's all.

12 RV: So after you finished at Ft. Eustis, you went to Ft. Benning.

13 AL: Ft. Benning, I was permanent party at Lawson Field, 507th Trans Attachment.

14 RV: That's what I was going to ask you, with the 507th. What was your job there? What
15 did you do day to day?

16 AL: During the day we'd go down Lawson Field and we'd work on planes. You actually
17 had the hands on. We pulled guard duty around the airfield, which I didn't like that at all.

18 RV: Why not?

19 AL: Well because I was permanent party. You're still doing stuff like that. Once you got
20 out of Basic, you lay off that, but... I learned later in Vietnam that we had guard like every couple of
21 weeks (laughter). So it wasn't so bad down there.

22 RV: Right, what kind of aircraft did you work on there at Lawson?

23 AL: At Lawson, they were the smaller fixed wing – you know the airplanes. There was a
24 few helicopters, but the small helicopters, like the two-man helicopters, which were, I forgot the
25 name for them...the Birdog [Iroquois]. I think it was the Birdog [Iroquois], the small one. We
26 worked on those but we didn't have the Hueys or anything like that. Then an interesting part down
27 in Ft. Benning was just before I left to go to California and to go into the 330th, I was put into the
28 11th Air Assault (test). The 11th Air Assault was a big thing in those days. Some general came out
29 with this concept of air mobility. It was the 11th Air Assault. What was strange I've got a patch at
30 home, that I was actually in the 11th Air Assault and they never went overseas, it was strictly a test

1 outfit. Later on they were served [switched] into another, I think it was the 1st Cav. That's what
2 they went into. I was actually a member in that unit.

3 RV: That's interesting; this was at the very birth of using the helicopters.

4 AL: Right.

5 RV: As that tactic of assaulting in...

6 AL: That's right.

7 RV: That basically used to be horseback.

8 AL: Right, air mobile, that was the big thing.

9 RV: So Benning, you were there from November '62 to March of 1963?

10 AL: Right.

11 RV: So you did this kind of work, tell me a little bit about what the work was. You said you
12 were fixing the fixed wing craft.

13 AL: You worked on various aircraft and you worked at the field, right at Lawson Field,
14 which was the main field. Then that's all we did. We went down to the field and the hangers and
15 worked. I was there not that long, I really didn't get into it. You just worked on the various planes
16 down there.

17 RV: When you finished here in March '63 why did you go to California was this a normal
18 rotation or was this your preparation?

19 AL: No, what happened was I was on what they call a TWIX, which meant orders that
20 came down. I was on a TWIX for Korea and a TWIX for Vietnam. I got called into the office and
21 the first sergeant says, 'LaRusso, you're on two TWIX.' He says, 'What's going to happen is you're
22 going to wind up in Vietnam.' I remember he told me and I said, 'Why is that?' He said, 'Right
23 now, Vietnam is hot. Korea is standing pat; you know, those guys are over there, and they're not
24 doing anything.' But he said, 'Vietnam is hot and they want these helicopters over there.' He said,
25 'You're going to wind up over there.' I said, 'Gee I've got a year to go.' He said, 'Exactly a year.'
26 That's when I went over there almost to the day in April.

27 RV: How did you feel about that when he told you?

28 AL: I was shocked. I thought I loved Ft. Benning. Ft. Benning was a huge base. It had a
29 shopping area, a lot of things to do there, you know? It was huge. I had nice job, eight-hour job.
30 We had nice barracks; they were like dorms. You had your own room, they were nice. I really
31 enjoyed being there. It wasn't bad at all; it was probably my best duty.

1 RV: How much did you keep in touch with your family?
2 AL: We used to call and write all the time. It wasn't that far away.
3 RV: Were you dating anyone?
4 AL: No. When I came home on leave I'd take girls out and stuff in Angola. But in the
5 service I never...in the first place, Columbus, Georgia, right around Ft. Benning, it was a post town
6 and there were these bars. Not the kind of girls that you'd want to associate with, really.
7 RV: So you're told you're going to go to Vietnam and they're going to ship you, I guess, to
8 California for the training before hand, the staging area?
9 AL: Well what happened was our company formed there. They came from all over the
10 country to be in this company.
11 RV: This is at Sharpe Army Depot?
12 AL: Sharpe Army Depot and all it was, was a gigantic depot and there was a civilians
13 there. So every day we'd jump in our ¾ ton or our jeep and we'd go down to the depot to work on
14 rotor blades. Of course the civilians, the Civil Service people they didn't like us hanging around
15 there because we were taking away their jobs. So they'd say, 'Listen, you guys get scarce.' So we
16 would get scarce. We'd go into Stockton. Stockton was the closest town. It's quite a bit larger
17 today than it was back in those days. It was a small little city. We'd go down there and we'd go to
18 movies or hang out at the gin mills and stuff like that.
19 RV: So your job was basically...? Was this during the day?
20 AL: Yes, you had to get scarce because they didn't want us around. They were scared.
21 They didn't know at the time this war was... At this time, our equipment was coming in too. It was
22 a huge depot down there and it had all kinds of aircraft and then these officers started coming in. It
23 took about a month to form this outfit. Then we just went down to Travis, loaded on buses and
24 hopped on a plane and went overseas, the whole company went at one time, which is unusual.
25 RV: Tell me Tony, what did you know about what was happening in Southeast Asia or
26 Vietnam at this point?
27 AL: Not too much.
28 RV: This is early.
29 AL: Not too much.
30 RV: It's not really on the public radar screen.

1 AL: That's exactly right, I mean people didn't even hear of Vietnam. Didn't even know
2 what, I never knew what the heck it was. It was just starting to heat up. There wasn't much news
3 like you said in the paper and stuff like that. It was sort of a period where not too much was going
4 on. The only ones you saw were the Special Forces living in the jungle, which later on when we
5 got there we ran into a lot of them. They were strictly advisors. If you look at the early part of the
6 war, that's exactly what happened. You'd get a Special Forces guy living with the ARVN troops.
7 That's what happened. We didn't have all the helicopters at that time.

8 RV: What did you think was the reason why the United States was involved in Vietnam at
9 this point, thinking then? What were your thoughts then? Did you just not care or were you aware
10 something is going on there; I understand why I am going, or was it something else?

11 AL: I really didn't understand. It was very, very similar to the South and North Korea that
12 we knew. The southern part of the country fighting the northern part, which that's what it was. The
13 one thing, this guerilla warfare was strange to us at this time. That they could infiltrate in your
14 lines. If you see what's going on in Iraq it's very similar to what we encountered over there. I
15 mean we thought we were going to have these great battles with these Iraqi soldiers and all of a
16 sudden they disappeared, where were they? They took their uniforms off and melted into the
17 countryside, same as the Viet Cong. So now you're fighting an unseen enemy. I think that the
18 Iraqis learned a lot from Vietnam. That's what they're fighting, kind of war they're fighting, guerilla
19 warfare.

20 RV: Were you all told or trained about, 'Here's what you're going to expect over there'?

21 AL: No, they just said it was going to be awful hot. We had to send our green uniforms
22 home, you know our dress greens. They said put them in a box and send them home, you're not
23 going to use these. Sure enough, we never had to.

24 RV: Was there any cultural training? Like, here's the language...

25 AL: No. No language or none of that.

26 RV: You know you're going to go over there for a year is that right?

27 AL: Right, the tour was a year. That was the tour and that was the deal. Another thing
28 was you could be sure you weren't going to come home in that time unless somebody got killed or
29 something. We used to kid about that. When somebody got killed over there one or two guys
30 would have to go home with the body. I don't know if you knew that or not.

31 RV: Escorting the body.

1 AL: Yes, escort the body. We used to kid about that and say 'Gee I hope something
2 happens so we can go back home.' It really wasn't...well, you joke a lot, when you're in that
3 atmosphere you find time to joke, believe it or not. You see movies about it and stuff like that, it's
4 true. One of our favorites was, say a guy was going on guard duty and you'd be going back to the
5 barracks or a tent and you'd say, 'I'll see you in the morning. Or will I?' We'd kid about it. Or
6 somebody would be getting out of a helicopter in Saigon, you had to go in the morning. So the
7 helicopter blades would be whirling and the guys would be getting on the helicopter and we'd say
8 'I'll see you tonight. Or will I?' That's the way we used to joke (laughter).

9 RV: What did you parents think about you going over for a year?

10 AL: Well they were scared. They were scared because my parents had a lot of
11 experience with my brothers and my father. They knew war and combat. It was no secret in our
12 house. I wasn't the first one, don't forget. My mother was worried. They encouraged us a lot to
13 write home. The biggest thing, coming from a small town, I had a lot of friends, my family had a lot
14 of friends and I got so many packages. My mother would wrap three or four sticks of pepperoni
15 with aluminum foil and she put it in a box. So once a month I'd get this pepperoni. Well the mail
16 clerk, he knew that it was pepperoni. So he'd say, 'LaRusso, you got pepperoni.' I mean he would
17 yell it. All the guys would come to my footlocker, I'd get a knife and I'd cut everybody a piece. By
18 the time I got done, I had a little piece for myself.

19 RV: That's great.

20 AL: Then they sent me cookies from the various organizations and the stuff. Because I
21 was one of the few people that was in Vietnam from my community. I tell you, that stuff from
22 home, that's great. You can't beat it and the letters and the things that were sent to me, the
23 newspaper articles back home that I was over there and stuff. It was just great. It made you feel
24 good.

25 RV: Was there any discussion when you were there in California getting ready to ship out
26 about comparing your service there as the young son in the family going to your war versus your
27 older brothers, that went to their war? Was there any discussion about that as you were doing your
28 duty? 'This is not the same kind of thing,' anything like that?

29 AL: I was lucky up to that point, I stayed in the States, but now I had to pay the piper. I
30 had to go over and my brothers were concerned. They wrote to me and they said, 'You know
31 you're going to go to a place that looks like there is going to be some action there.' Sure enough,

1 there was. We just got away from Korea, it wasn't that far behind. You know people were
2 concerned about that. It was starting to heat up over there.

3 RV: How did you feel about it before you left?

4 AL: I was kind of scared. Your buddies put you through. You form these bonds with
5 these guys, you spend a lot of time with them; people don't understand that. I remember coming
6 home and talking to my friends and they'd say, 'How can your buddies be so important to you?'
7 You write cards to them, I still do. I still write Christmas cards to three or four of my good buddies.
8 I said, 'You know you are my friends, I see you a couple of hours a day.' I said, 'But these guys
9 you're with them 24 hours a day. You're always with them and they watch your back and you
10 watch theirs.' That's a great bond, tremendous bond that you form with your buddies. You say
11 your buddy is your buddy. It's the way you feel. You'll never forget these guys. I never will.

12 RV: Do you remember what the morale was, the mood was in your unit there before you
13 guys shipped out?

14 AL: Well, the morale was that nobody wanted to really go. It was uncharted territory. Like
15 I said before we didn't have too much information. We knew people were getting killed over there
16 and shot at. I think everybody was a little scared. Except maybe the old timers that had been
17 through Korea and that. We had quite a few of those, the older sergeants and that.

18 RV: Did they talk to you about their experiences?

19 AL: Yes, we used to talk about Korea a lot and things that happened over there.

20 RV: So you depart out of Travis. What was that flight like?

21 AL: Oh, the flight! We went on MATS, military air transport. Richard, there was two
22 windows in the middle of the plane. That's all there was, we were in sling seats. Sling seats!

23 RV: I can't imagine.

24 AL: We had no stewardesses. We had PFCs, cooks that heated up the food. I don't
25 know how they did it. We had little trays and that's how you ate. We were actually in the air
26 between Travis and Saigon 22 hours.

27 RV: Oh, gosh.

28 AL: Our itinerary was that we flew to Hickam in Hawaii. We landed there, we got out, we
29 had something to eat, jumped back on the plane went to Clark Air Force Base. Stopped at Clark
30 for a few hours, Clark to Tokyo, landed in Tokyo.

31 RV: Why up in Tokyo?

1 AL: I don't know. Tokyo to Saigon. I'll never forget Tokyo as we were coming in for a
2 landing the lights, the neon lights. It was just a sea of neon lights. I never saw a city like that.
3 RV: This is the first time you're overseas as well right?
4 AL: Right. I was never overseas.
5 RV: Were you able to get off in Tokyo and see anything?
6 AL: No, not long enough. Just stop and boom back on the plane. That's how we flew all
7 the way over on MATs. The worst flight in the world.
8 RV: I've flown over to Vietnam a couple of times and I can't imagine doing it in that
9 fashion. What was the mood on the plane like?
10 AL: Just terrible. You couldn't look out the windows. It was just terrible. This plane was
11 the pits. But we made it. We got over there and we landed we had orientation. We got off the
12 plane and we had khakis on, dress khakis.
13 RV: Where are you at Tan Son Nhut is that where you came in?
14 AL: Yes, Tan Son Nhut. Then we went into this room and this colonel came and briefed
15 us, orientation. He told us about the snakes. That's what really bothered me. I didn't even know
16 what Viet Cong were, but I hated those snakes (laughter).
17 RV: It's like, 'Welcome to the war, LaRusso, here are the snakes.'
18 AL: I know it. I saw some big ones believe me. I saw a python one time wrapped around
19 a strut of a plane, right on the base. They were all over the base during the monsoon season they
20 used to come out of their holes and stuff. They'd be all over. I remember one time I was going to
21 take a shower. Our showers were outside. It was just like a barrel.
22 RV: This was at Vung Tau right?
23 AL: Vung Tau right. I opened the door of the barrack and had a towel around me. Here
24 comes these two snakes, pit vipers coming at me. I jumped from the floor to the top bunk. It was
25 two bunks, the top bunk, I made one jump to the top bunk. I mean I didn't like snakes (laughs).
26 RV: Tell me when you deplaned there at Saigon at Tan Son Nhut, and you stepped on the
27 Vietnamese soil what did you think? What was it like?
28 AL: Tan Son Nhut was a nice airfield. It was just starting to pick up. Eventually in the war,
29 that was the busiest airfield in the world. It had so many flights. As time went on I flew in and out
30 of there quite a few times at Vung Tau. It was kind of modern looking, there was a lot of
31 Vietnamese around and American soldiers. It wasn't too bad. If you had duty in Saigon, that

1 wasn't bad duty. Believe me you lived pretty good. A lot of the soldiers at that time were stationed
2 at Saigon, office jobs and stuff like that. You know intelligence branch. They were mostly in
3 Saigon, they weren't out in the sticks. That's when they had those briefings all the time. That was
4 all in Saigon.

5 RV: So you were taken from the plane right into this briefing?

6 AL: Right. I remember the heat. It was hot and we had the khakis on and just started
7 sweating like crazy.

8 RV: Did you have a side arm Tony? Were you armed at all?

9 AL: Not at that juncture, no. We didn't get a side arm until we got to Vung Tau. We had
10 side arms and then they issued us. You ain't going to believe this, we were issued M-1s.

11 RV: Really?

12 AL: We didn't have the M-14.

13 RV: Wow! That's right this is April 1963.

14 AL: Right and no clips. We had boxes of ammo.

15 RV: Really?

16 AL: Honest to God.

17 RV: It's like they were trying to maybe get rid of the surplus they had in the States.

18 AL: We had the M-1s until we were issued the M-14s later on. Quite a while after. But
19 what you did was you bought a side arm from a guy that was going home or somebody would sell
20 you like a .45. So most all of us had some kind of a side arm.

21 RV: We didn't really cover this while you were training, what kind of a shot were you?
22 Were you comfortable with the rifle?

23 AL: I was never a hunter or something like that. I was a marksman. I was never a great
24 shot. I was never a hunter like my brothers were. My brothers both hunted and I didn't. I was
25 never much into guns. I was never a great gunman. I was good enough to pass.

26 RV: Did you know you were going to Vung Tau before you got there or were you issued
27 orders to Vung Tau once you arrived?

28 AL: Apparently our unit was being sent to Vung Tau and there was some of the advanced
29 party already there. Then there was a convoy that went from Saigon with most of the equipment.
30 Most of the equipment were vans. These vans with instruments, there was an instrument van and
31 there was a hydraulics van. There were different vans. They just backed these vans up by the

1 hanger and you worked in the van or in the hanger. That's where you worked. Now the most
2 popular was the instrument van. I'll tell you why. The instrument van had to have a temperature
3 that was level so they had air conditioning. It was the only one on the whole base that had air
4 conditioning. That's all we had in the barracks were fans and stuff. Like I said it was hot. The
5 coldest it got in the year I was there was 79 at Vung Tau.

6 RV: That's right on the coast.

7 AL: Pardon?

8 RV: That's right on the coast.

9 AL: Right it's near the water, right. That's how hot it was. Every day it would hit 100.
10 Then we went to Da Lat. I told you about the trip to Da Lat that was up in the mountains, it was
11 beautiful. It was like in the 60s, but at Vung Tau it was hot every day the sun was up. Unless it
12 was monsoon season which was two months of rain. But after rain the sun came out and dried
13 everything up.

14 RV: How did you deal with that kind of weather?

15 AL: A lot of people took it worse than me. People had rashes and stuff. Maybe it was
16 because of my Sicilian skin or something. I took it pretty good. I wasn't that bad compared to
17 some like say a person of Norwegian ancestry or light, blond hair. Those guys have a lot of trouble
18 with that sun.

19 RV: Well Tony, this might be a good stopping point before we pick up again with what you
20 did in Vung Tau.

21 AL: Yeah.

22 RV: Let me make one correction. I gave the wrong date to begin the interview; it is
23 February 17, not February 18. So we're set there. Let me go ahead and pause this and we'll pick
24 up again, Tony.

Interview with Anthony LaRusso
Session 2 of 3
February 24, 2005

1 RV: This is Richard Verrone. I am continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Anthony
2 LaRusso. Today is February 24, 2005. It's approximately 1:23 PM Central Standard Time. I am
3 again Lubbock, Texas at Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive Interview Room. Tony, let's pick
4 up with where we were. You were on your way over to the Republic of South Vietnam, the
5 Republic of Vietnam, excuse me. When we ended we started talking about some other things and
6 how you got over there. One thing you mentioned to me was a passport; that you all literally
7 needed a passport to go into South Vietnam.

8 AL: That's right.

9 RV: Tell me about that.

10 AL: Well when we were in California at the Sharpe Army Depot in Lathrop, California, the
11 sergeants came to us, everybody in the company and they said, 'All right, we want you to send to
12 your state capital for your original birth certificate, original.' I looked at him, 'I've got a birth
13 certificate at home, but it was very simple, mother and father, I was born at such and such hospital
14 in Buffalo, New York.' That was it. But little did I know that the original in kept in the state capital in
15 the Department of Vital Statistics. So we all had to throw in two bucks, which we got reimbursed,
16 two dollars in cash. We sent back because you had to pay for it, now I think it's about 10 bucks it
17 costs you, maybe more. At that time it was two dollars, we sent to Albany, New York and we got
18 our original birth certificate and then we were issued the passport after we got the birth certificate
19 because you had to prove that you were born in the United States. When I first saw this original
20 birth certificate, I couldn't believe it because it had all this information that you don't get on the one
21 that you get at the city hall or the town hall. It was interesting because I've still got that. I've kept it.
22 In fact when I signed up for Social Security I used that as my birth certificate, it had the seal on it
23 and the lady said, 'Where did you get this? That's the original that the doctor signed and the sent it
24 to Albany!' So that was interesting. Then when we got there they took them away from us. We
25 had to hand them in and they kept them until we left. When we left they gave them back to us.
26 Then when we got to America I got a letter in the mail saying, 'If you want to keep it, let us know
27 and you can keep it.' I should have kept it as a souvenir but I didn't. It was stamped South
28 Vietnam.

1 RV: Right, that's very, very interesting. You also mentioned being issued the M-1 with no
2 ammunition.

3 AL: Well we had ammo but they were boxes of ammo. They were like little cardboard
4 boxes like you would go to K-mart or Wal-Mart and buy shells to go hunting. That's just a box of
5 shells, no clips. We hadn't got the clips yet. The M-14s we weren't issued those right away we
6 had to wait maybe five or six months before we got the M-14, which was the weapon that they
7 used over there for the first part of the war and then they went to the R-15s and different ones. So
8 the result was too, that most of us had side arms. We would buy a side arm from maybe a guy
9 going home or you would buy them. We were allowed to keep a side arm.

10 RV: Now you couldn't request to have one issued to you, you had to actually go purchase
11 one?

12 AL: Right. That was yours and when you left you would sell it because you couldn't bring
13 it home. So you would sell it over there.

14 RV: Did you all have a problem with that? Did you feel that was adequate?

15 AL: No. The thing was, everything was dangerous there. You could go in the village and
16 something could happen. You could be on a plane... The side arm, you were more attuned to the
17 side arm than you were the issued M-1s and the M-14s later on.

18 RV: Tell me, you get into Saigon there at Tan Son Nhut and then you're transported down
19 to Vung Tau. Is that correct?

20 AL: Right.

21 RV: Tell me about the trip down and your mood. I want to know how you felt personally
22 about what was happening.

23 AL: Well, everything was happening so fast. All I can remember was the heat. We had
24 our Class A uniform on, khakis. I can just remember sweating like nobody's business. It was hot.
25 The first day we got there, we had to put our clothes lockers together. They were metal lockers,
26 which didn't hold up very well during the monsoon season because they would rust, get rusty and
27 stuff. That's where you'd put your clothes, your civilian clothes and lock things up. The first day
28 we got down to Vung Tau, we were supposed to put these lockers together. I want to tell you
29 something, putting that together is like an easy job. You're putting screws in these little holes,
30 right? But the heat. I mean we're outside. The heat was bearing down and I can remember just
31 soaked to the skin with my Class As on. They wouldn't let us change yet because we had to get

1 these lockers in there so we can put our clothes in there. The first thing I can remember is putting
2 those lockers together. Everybody had to do it; everybody in the company had to do it. So as time
3 went on, you get accustomed to the heat, but boy I tell you. When we first got there it took a while.

4 RV: How long did it take you to acclimate?

5 AL: I would say three or four months. I mean writing a letter home, a simple thing of
6 writing a letter home you had to put a towel underneath your arm because everything would get
7 wet. Paper, the stationary, everything would be wet just from sweating.

8 RV: Tell me about your barracks, what your living quarters were like.

9 AL: When we first got there we lived in tents, we just had tents. Then we eventually
10 moved into these old, I don't know if they were World War II or if they were Japanese because that
11 particular Vung Tau at one time, the Japanese were there. The French were there. So they had
12 old hangers that were already in place. Then the PSP, which is the perforated steel planking all
13 that was, was just laid over the sand. That's how the planes landed, we didn't have concrete or
14 asphalt in the beginning. I notice the pictures of Vung Tau now they have concrete and asphalt at
15 the airport. We just had the PSP. When a plane landed that thing would clink. You could hear
16 that thing clinking. It was kind of hard to sleep too, because planes were coming in and out and in
17 and out. Helicopters at night you can still hear the sound of that huey. I can still just like in the
18 movies. Like in *Apocalypse Now*, those hueys, that's exactly the sound that we had.

19 RV: If you hear that today, I imagine that brings back...

20 AL: Oh my God, you can't forget that sound.

21 RV: When you do hear that, is that a good feeling, a bad feeling? What is it inside?

22 AL: Well it's a bad feeling. It's a bad feeling because it brought a lot of bad memories too.
23 You know I'm a 23-year-old kid and you're not as fearful as a 23-year-old kid. Like I'm 66 now and
24 it's a little different. You know?

25 RV: Slightly, yes.

26 AL: I'd be afraid to even go on a plane now and when I was there we flew almost every
27 day. You'd go someplace; you'd jump in a helicopter, jump in a light plane and go someplace.

28 RV: Wouldn't think twice about it.

29 AL: Pardon? I wouldn't think twice.

30 RV: What would you say, Tony, was the morale of the guys in your unit and just overall as
31 you witnessed the first week or so you were there?

1 AL: Well the morale was pretty low because everything was new. It was hotter than hell.
2 It was tough sleeping, you had to put a mosquito net on every night. You'd better tuck that in
3 because there was always one damn mosquito that always got in. Got in there and fooled around
4 while you were sleeping. We were allowed to go to the village of Vung Tau, which I would say was
5 maybe two or three miles away from the base, but you had to be back by midnight.

6 RV: Did they tell you why?

7 AL: There was a curfew. You had to be back. Of course they told us that there were Viet
8 Cong all over the place, which we believed that there were. In fact here was a mountain. Some of
9 the pictures the black and whites that you see, there was a mountain that was really close by our
10 base. We called that VC Mountain because if you came in, in a light plane or ever a Caribou and if
11 you were too low, they could shoot at you. You actually were shot at, just coming in for a landing.
12 So the pilots would try to go away from there. But there was VC there.

13 RV: Did you all talk about your mission and like what the United States was doing there?
14 Was there a discussion more about that big picture?

15 AL: No. The political atmosphere, we had no idea. I've read a lot about it since I left
16 there. In fact, I had an argument with my Parish priest about it. We were talking about Vietnam
17 one day and the Catholics and the Buddhists. Well, the Catholics were numbered about 9 million
18 and the Buddhists were like 30 million and the Catholics ran the country. Diem and his brother and
19 his wife they were all strict, very strict conservative Catholics. I didn't realize it at the time, we
20 knew that Diem was the president, but we never knew all this intrigue between the Buddhists.
21 Then when that one Buddhist burned himself, that hit all the papers. Pictures were all over the
22 place of that Buddhists and what they were doing was rebelling against the Catholic administration
23 there.

24 RV: That gentleman burned himself in May of 1963. You got there what, in...?

25 AL: April.

26 RV: In April. Tell me about that and how you heard about it and your thoughts and the
27 guys around you. What were you all thinking? Self-emulation is a huge act. What did that do to
28 you?

29 AL: We found out in the papers, we used to get the *Pacific Stars and Stripes* and between
30 the papers and the Vietnamese papers, I mean we couldn't read them because of the language.
31 But the pictures were there. Plus the pictures that I sent you, the one I sent you, they were all

1 over. Every place you went, people had those pictures in the market place and all over the place.
2 That's how we got to know about that.

3 RV: Did you guys think the Buddhist protests were just out of hand or did you say, 'Wow,
4 good for him'?

5 AL: No, we just didn't fully understand the political ramifications between the Catholics
6 and the Buddhists. We saw a lot of monks every time you'd go into the village or you go to Saigon
7 there was monks all over the place. We had Buddhist temples. I think I sent a picture of that. You
8 know it just seemed that everybody was Buddhist. But yet in the village there was a Catholic
9 church that we used to go to on Sunday.

10 RV: Were you free to go whenever you wanted to go there or were you limited?

11 AL: No, just Sundays.

12 RV: Just for Mass.

13 AL: Yes, just for Mass. Then when Major Sullivan came, our second CO, he was a very
14 strict Catholic and I'd ride with him at Lieutenant Kaercher who was a graduate of Notre Dame.
15 The three of us would ride together because I would never miss Mass. I still don't. I go to Mass
16 every day.

17 RV: Do you really?

18 AL: Yes.

19 RV: Back then was it every Sunday?

20 AL: Just Sundays we would go. It was a Vietnamese Mass. In those days the Mass was
21 in Vietnamese. This was when Pope John XXIII was Pope. They were letting you run the Mass in
22 your own language rather than the Latin I grew up with. What we would do is there were some of
23 us that would go there and like I said Major Sullivan when he came later on. In the beginning
24 maybe four or five of us that were Catholic would take a jeep and go down there, go to Mass.
25 During the sermon we couldn't understand the Vietnamese so we'd walk out and have a cigarette
26 and then go back in again. On the steps of the church, there were these vendors that were selling
27 pictures of John XXIII. They loved that John XXIII, the Catholics there. He was the one that was
28 opening up the church to your own language.

29 RV: Tell me while we're talking about that, what role...I can only assume that religion did
30 play a large role for you while you were there. That it did serve some purpose. Can you talk about
31 how that did affect you, the ability to attend Mass while you were in Vietnam?

1 AL: Like I said I had the ability to go and I wanted to go. We would make it a point that on
2 Sunday, most of the time we were off duty unless we had a job that we couldn't get off. For the
3 most part we'd be able to go down there on Sunday, go to Mass at 10:00 or whatever. We had the
4 ability to do that because there was a church right there in Vung Tau. There was no Mass on the
5 base; we had no chaplain. So we had to go to the village to go to Mass.

6 RV: Did your spiritual beliefs change in any way while you were there that year?

7 AL: Like I said I was an altar boy and very devout. I prayed a lot, too. Let me tell you, you
8 pray a lot. You want to get home and you've got your family and everybody, your friends praying
9 for you over there. It made a big difference. After a while, we made the best of it. We were there;
10 there was nothing we could do. We were there for a year. You knew you were there for a year, so
11 things got a little easier as we went along. We started a volleyball team and we played sports. We
12 played softball and we went down to the soccer field in the village and carved out a softball
13 diamond. We'd play against the other companies. Sports was big.

14 RV: Were you able to keep up with sports from back in the United States?

15 AL: Yes. My mother would send me the local paper, which was a weekly. Plus my
16 brother got the *Buffalo Evening News* and he got a subscription for a year, but they would not send
17 that right away. I would get issues for maybe a month before. So I'd be reading the news a month
18 before. So the only way I would keep up would be the *Stars and Stripes*.

19 RV: Tell me about Vung Tau and how many people were there? When you arrived there
20 in April of '63, how large was the Vung Tau Air Base?

21 AL: I would say... you mean the village?

22 RV: The base first.

23 AL: The base, we had approximately 500 people. Let me see I wrote them down here.
24 We had the 1st Aviation Company was there. The 611th Transportation and the 61st Caribou. Now
25 some of those companies had companies...like the 1st Aviation, they were all over Vietnam. But
26 that was a detachment that was there. The biggest company the 330th because we were a
27 maintenance company that was the 4th Echelon. We had the ability to fix planes that maybe the 1st
28 or 2nd Echelon couldn't do. We had these vans that we brought in from Saigon and each van for
29 instance the machinist van they had equipment to make things. There was an instrument van,
30 which everybody liked because it was air-conditioned. It was the only place on the base that was
31 air-conditioned. Then we had a Quonset hut that served as an engine, for the guys that worked on

1 engines. There was a photo lab. When the Mohawks flew they would take pictures of their
2 bombing and shooting and stuff and they would bring back pictures. So they had a fellow there
3 that used to develop them.

4 RV: Tony, what was your typical day like, describe what your duties were and from
5 wakeup to going to bed.

6 AL: We'd get up early in the morning and then go down to the mess hall, we had a mess
7 hall there and we'd have our breakfast.

8 RV: Describe that for me.

9 AL: We had eggs and pancakes, the same s-on-s, shit on a shingle. The regular fare.
10 The only thing was there was no fresh milk. Milk was powdered. There was a big bucket of milk
11 but there was always a fly that was dead in there from swimming around. That's why I didn't drink
12 milk, I drank coffee. When the cooks were cooking, the Army cooks, they'd be sweating. I mean,
13 can you imagine? It's 100 degrees outside and you're cooking over a hot grill. So the sweat is
14 going into the eggs. We would say. 'Forget the eggs today, give me some toast,' (laughter).

15 RV: Those cooks were doing their best. So after breakfast what would you do?

16 AL: Then we would report for duty and whatever job you had to do that day, the sergeants
17 would tell us what we had to do. We would work all day and then we'd get off about 4:00 for the
18 most part. Unless we had a modification to do one time and we started working shifts. You'd be
19 working the midnight shift or the afternoon shift; around the clock we had shifts. The good thing
20 was they kept the mess hall open so that you were able to go over and have something to eat
21 while you were working. They couldn't close it because the midnight shift would come in and have
22 theirs. So the cooks started rotating too. That's what we did for the most part we'd be off at 4:00.
23 We'd probably run to the club. There was two clubs on base. There was an NCO club and the EM
24 club. Then in the village of Vung Tau where the officers stayed at the Pacific Hotel, which was a
25 beautiful large hotel, it wasn't air conditioned or anything but it was nice compared to our barracks.
26 That's where all the officers and all the pilots would stay. They took over the whole hotel.

27 RV: Before we talk about downtime, tell me about your workday. Can you describe some
28 of the typical jobs you would be doing, what kind of repairs you all would be doing?

29 AL: Let's take rotor blades. Rotor blades, when we went to school they taught us how to
30 fix a rotor blade. Now the rotor blades that we worked on, which were on the CH-21 were made
31 out of wood, with these wooden panels in between. When we got there, the Hueys had a metallic,

1 aluminum type blade, which was a lot easier. Now if the blade was in bad shape and you
2 determined that, we just ordered new ones from Saigon. You can't mess with the blades, because
3 a rotor blade is very important. Now a helicopter, when it has a hydraulic system where if your
4 engine goes when you're in flight, say somebody shot the engine or the engine died. You can
5 auto-rotate that helicopter down. Whether it's a Huey or CH-21. But if the blades get hit or if they
6 hit a wire or something, they're gone. That thing is going to go straight down. Or the tail rotor; the
7 tail rotor will make that thing spin and go down. Our work was in props, we worked on propellers
8 for the light planes like the otter and the birdog. We worked on those props, but we never
9 messed with anything...if we thought it was no good we just ordered another one. You put a high
10 priority. You'd go over and you'd order it and you'd put a number one priority on it and boom, you'd
11 get it. We were number one in the whole Army. Vietnam at that time was the first priority. So,
12 never had any trouble getting anything.

13 RV: So supplies were not an issue?

14 AL: Right. If you needed it, you got it. All you had to do was put the top priority on it and it
15 came. They had big warehouses at Tan Son Nhut where they had a lot of equipment.

16 RV: Did you all get along well during the day?

17 AL: Yes. I hung around with basically five or six guys that we were all drafted. We were
18 all from the north. Most of the guys that I hung around with all worked in the aircraft industry, got
19 drafted. They were sharp. One guy worked at Hamilton Standard in Connecticut, which made
20 engines. My friend John, an old Jersey boy, he worked at Flying Tigers. He was an A-1 mechanic
21 at Flying Tigers. These guys when they got drafted, they threw them right into helicopters and the
22 light planes. These guys were experienced. I didn't have that experience; I worked in a grocery
23 store.

24 RV: I take it they accepted you just fine.

25 AL: Yes. Between the sports after duty it kept us going plus the movies. We had good
26 movies over there.

27 RV: Tell me about that. You're all through I guess you could you go back and take a nap,
28 would you eat? Would you go play? What would you do?

29 AL: We'd usually go to the club. Have a few beers and then once in a while they'd have a
30 Vietnamese band that played rock and roll, not very well (laughs).

31 RV: What was that like?

1 AL: They were terrible. Our music came from the *Armed Forces Radio Network*. Every
2 time I see Robin Williams with the *Good Morning Vietnam* that was our only music. *Armed Forces*
3 *Radio Network*.

4 RV: What kind of music do you remember listening to over there? What times do you
5 hear now that take you back?

6 AL: Brenda Lee. I must have heard Brenda Lee a million times. Let's see who else. The
7 Beatles, they didn't hit yet. There was a guy named Cliff Richard, I think he was either a
8 Frenchman or an Englishman.

9 RV: He's British.

10 AL: Is he British?

11 RV: Yes he sure is.

12 AL: Oh my God, the records he had! We listened to a lot of his too. It was just basically
13 the rock, Elvis Presley and stuff like that, you know.

14 RV: Did music play a big role for you all there?

15 AL: Yes we always listened to the radio. We always listened to the radio and once in a
16 while like I said they'd bring in a rock and roll group – Vietnamese. They weren't very good.

17 RV: Even after a few beers?

18 AL: (Laughter). A lot of beers. I've got to tell you about the beers too.

19 RV: Ok, please do.

20 AL: I think I told you before but most of the beer came from the west coast. Lucky Lager,
21 there was Budweiser. Just popular beers at that time, we didn't drink the Ba Muoi Ba or the Biere
22 LaRue. If we went to the village we had to because they didn't have beer. But on the base we had
23 good beer. We started this, I don't know if they ever kept doing it but when we'd go over to the
24 club they had no ice. So we would put tomato juice with the beer, mix it with beer. I have never
25 done this since I came home. But over there we would mix that tomato juice in the beer and it
26 would taste better. Don't tell me why. The other thing we ate were these little cans of Vienna
27 Sausages. Because you know, it was in a can. That was our snack. We didn't have chips and
28 pretzels and that. We had those little Vienna Sausages. When you got hungry you'd buy some of
29 those. I haven't eaten those since I came home.

30 RV: You had your fill.

1 AL: That's right (laughs). But the clubs were nice. The clubs were nice the NCO. We
2 had slot machines. They had a rule. First of all a sergeant would take over the club. To this day I
3 wondered when we first got there the first sergeant said, 'Anybody want to run the EM club?' A
4 Spec-5 put his hand up right away and he said, 'Ok you got [it],' this old timer. 'Who wants to run
5 the NCO?' Another sergeant puts his hand up. Well that was the biggest racket in the world,
6 running the club.

7 RV: How so?

8 AL: Because that's all you did. You hired. They hired Vietnamese people from the village
9 to clean the place and do work around there. You hired the people, you took care of the money
10 and don't forget at that time we got paid in cash. We got paid in green backs.

11 RV: Did you really?

12 AL: Yes, we didn't get the script until after I left, so every payday you'd go and get your
13 money. You always bought some piasters, you know the change over. You always bought them
14 because if you ever got caught with piasters that say you got on the black market, and the
15 difference was on the base you would get 75 piasters for a dollar. In the village at the tailor shop
16 on the black market you would get 120.

17 RV: That's what you would use to do your buying and selling.

18 AL: That's right. On the 15th of the month, if you were broke the guy that ran the club
19 would give you a chit, what they call a chit book, which was like money. But at the end of the
20 month when you got your pay, you had to go back to the club and pay, so you were never broke on
21 base, that's why you would stay on the base. Because if you went to the village and you wanted to
22 go drinking in the village, you had to have money. They had a pretty good system.

23 RV: Tell me more about the entertainment. Talk to me about the movies you all would
24 see. How often would you see those?

25 AL: The movies were very good movies. A lot of British movies. I can remember a lot of
26 British movies. The caribou company used to fly all over Vietnam with the movies. So some of the
27 caribou were headquartered down in our place it just so happened that was the movie caribou that
28 used to fly all over the country. We always got a good movie, first run movie.

29 RV: Tell me some of the ones that you saw, do you remember the titles?

30 AL: No. There were a lot of British movies. We spent a lot of time on the base watching
31 movies. At night that was about the only thing. You put your mosquito stuff on. I don't know what

1 heck they gave us, but that stuff kept the mosquitoes away. It was real sticky. We had like a little
2 movie house and we'd go down there and watch movies without doors. Open, just a screen and
3 the guy would show the movie.

4 RV: Was there a lot of alcoholism or just normal?

5 AL: A lot of drinking, a lot of drinking. That's all you did. A lot of parties, a lot of drinking.

6 RV: What about drug use? Was there anything like that you saw?

7 AL: Believe this or not, in the year I was there, the only drugs I saw were the Vietnamese.
8 I'll tell you how that came about. We were having some work done by a Vietnamese contractor,
9 which was run by the Filipinos. The company was Brown Root, Brown Root, that was a big
10 company that was tied in with Halliburton now. They would hire Filipinos to run the jobs and then
11 they would go into the village and hire the Vietnamese. What they would use was mahogany to
12 build. They built some officers offices at the base. They would get these big beams and I think I
13 sent you some pictures of those. These two Vietnamese would get this two-man saw, because
14 they didn't have no power saw and they would saw that mahogany beam by hand. So you can
15 imagine how much time that would take. So we noticed these Vietnamese when they started
16 getting tired they'd get a pipe, which was an opium pipe we found out, they'd throw some opium in
17 there and they'd smoke that, take a couple of puffs and then go like crazy. You know that would
18 give them energy. But as far as marijuana and stuff like that, no. No, I can never remember
19 seeing that. I would say drinking was big, but that's all we did was drink, you know? When you
20 went to Saigon you'd go to a bar and you'd drink over there – a lot of drinking. It was so cheap. At
21 the club a can of beer was a dime. Whiskey was 15 cents, if you drank whiskey.

22 RV: What were the clubs like? What did it look like inside?

23 AL: They were just like a club over here with tables and chairs. Nothing spectacular.
24 They had a bar up in front. Then they had the slot machines off to the side. They were simple. It
25 was nothing extravagant, it wasn't like Clark. We stopped when we went over, we stopped at Clark
26 EM club down at the Clark Base in the Philippines. Oh my God! It was like a palace. They had
27 beautiful accommodations at Clark.

28 RV: What about prostitutes, was that going on as much then? You hear talk about it
29 later...

30 AL: Yes. You'd be going off the base and they'd be waiting there. Or in the village you
31 went to a bar. The interesting thing about and I tell people over here when you went to a bar like in

1 Saigon. The bar had say 10 seats. Each seat had a bargirl. Now that girl would come over and
2 she would just pay attention to you. You know you bought her green tea, what we called the green
3 tea, which was some fake drink they would be drinking. You buy them a drink like you do over
4 here. She would talk to you and she'd say, 'Take me back to America,' and stuff like that. That
5 was interesting at each seat had a bargirl attached to it. Attached to that particular guy that sat
6 there.

7 RV: Did you have a choice if you wanted to sit down there, that was it?

8 AL: No you sat there and that girl came over. She just took care of you. It isn't like our
9 bars where you go in and you've got a couple waitresses that bring you a beer. So that was
10 different. The other thing that I found when I first got there was different was they only had one
11 men's room, or one restroom. The first time I'm in the restroom and I'm going to the bathroom and
12 here comes this girl, Vietnamese girl starts combing her hair at the mirror. I mean they only had
13 one. That was it. So that took a little while to get used to.

14 RV: I can imagine. Tell me about contact with home, writing family and how much they
15 wrote you?

16 AL: They encouraged us to write. Being from a town like Angola and a lot of people knew
17 I was there, I belonged to different organizations they would send me all kinds of mail. I would get
18 a lot of mail and a lot of food. Like I told you before about the pepperoni and the cookies. I got a
19 lot of mail. I never hurtled for mail.

20 RV: What about the other guys? Would you all get things in?

21 AL: Yes, most of the guys would get mail. But then there were some that didn't get much.
22 You knew that there was problems there. They'd be looking at you when you got your mail. Like I
23 said I came from a big family and all my family would write to me and my neighbors and cousins
24 and...I got a lot of mail.

25 RV: When the coup happened in November against Diem what was the atmosphere like?
26 What do you remember?

27 AL: Well the atmosphere, right away we were restricted to base. We couldn't go to the
28 village or anything. We had to stay right there. That was about a couple weeks until things quieted
29 down because they were worried that we'd get involved. So we had to stay away from it.

30 RV: Did they tell you, you all might be in danger?

1 AL: Right, we'd be in danger because we didn't know what was going to happen with
2 these people that took over. That was when Big Minh and that other general took over. I think it
3 was Vou.

4 RV: It was General Kahn.

5 AL: Kahn that was the one I mentioned before, yes. They over threw Big Minh and then
6 Big Minh came back later didn't he?

7 RV: He did just for a brief, literally about a day.

8 AL: You've got some good pictures of him too, those little black and whites, you can blow
9 those up and they'll come out real nice.

10 RV: I want to know more about the relationship with the guys there. What you're doing is
11 really important work on those helicopters and airplanes, this maintenance. I think maybe the
12 general public when they think about the Vietnam War they might not see you all; they might think
13 about that soldier out in the jungle or somebody flying missions over Hanoi.

14 AL: Right.

15 RV: But what you were doing was enabling all of that to function.

16 AL: Right, maintenance and support. The backup; that was us.

17 RV: How did you all feel about people that were out in the field, the advisors that were out
18 there?

19 AL: At that time the only ones that were out, they didn't have the infantry. At that time
20 they had the Special Forces and there was a lot of them in the beginning of the war. Special
21 Forces would go and live with the ARVN troops. They were advisors. They'd be out in the field.
22 We had very high regard for them, very high regard.

23 RV: The Special Forces?

24 AL: Right. Very high.

25 RV: How much did you interact with them?

26 AL: They would fly in and stay a couple days at our place. Our planes would have to take
27 them different places and we had a lot of interaction with the Special Forces where we got to know
28 them. We always had high regard for them. I believe they should be back today. I think that
29 Special Forces should...they were the cream of the crop at that time.

30 RV: Why do you think that?

1 AL: Well, you just can't fathom to go out and live in a country. You understand the
2 language and you're out in the field, you're with them. You've got a counterpart like a captain or a
3 lieutenant from the Vietnamese Army with you, but you're with them all the time. You start thinking
4 like them. We're on a base with all American soldiers and we're doing everything together,
5 whether we're working in the shops or in the hanger or we're playing volleyball or we're doing
6 things. What are they doing? These poor guys. We were watching movies at night. What are
7 they doing? That to me was, Special Forces guys, I have a high regard still to this day.

8 RV: Tell me about the Vietnamese population, what did you think of the people there?

9 AL: Let's face it; they went through a lot of other aggressors in those days, the Japs,
10 Japanese and then the French. They sort of took advantage of the situation. Everything was
11 money, everything you bargained with them. You went to the marketplace and you'd buy some silk
12 to send home or something. They'd say so much for so many piasters and you'd bargain with
13 them and you'd start walking away and then they'd come back. Stuff like that. I think they just took
14 advantage of the situation. They weren't crazy about the American soldiers.

15 RV: That's what I was going to ask you, how did they treat you?

16 AL: They treated us good, I mean they waited on you and everything else, but they were
17 strictly out to get your money. To them Americans, we were the richest country in the world.
18 Everybody had money.

19 RV: Do you think they resented the United States being there in their country?

20 AL: Yes.

21 RV: Even though we were saying we were helping them?

22 AL: Yes they resented us.

23 RV: This is early on? This is before there was an actual shooting war officially happened.

24 AL: Right.

25 RV: I can only imagine then if you felt that then in 1963 and '64 what it was like in 1969.

26 AL: Yes.

27 RV: Do you want to talk about Vung Tau, the village? Tell me about what that was like
28 and the size of it.

29 AL: It was a small village of course it was on the South China Sea and they had fishing
30 boats. I think they had three beaches at the time. They renamed all those beaches now, but the
31 beach that was in by the village, we couldn't swim in there or go in that water because it was

1 polluted, very badly polluted. All the sewers drained right into the sea. But if you went up a couple
2 of miles to Back Beach or French Beach, it was much clearer. We'd go down there and there was
3 a couple of bars and the interesting thing and I think I sent a picture. The one fellow that owned
4 one of the bars, he was part French, half French and half Greek. He had a daughter and she was
5 absolutely gorgeous. She had Greek and French blood. I mean she didn't even look like a
6 Vietnamese. She used to wait on us. Everybody was crazy about her. She was such a lady, such
7 a nice girl. Everybody had high regard for her. She was like 18 or 19 years old. Absolutely
8 gorgeous. We'd go down there, we'd go in the water. On the weekends especially we'd be in the
9 village. They had these little what they called bonnie-bob stands. You'd go up there and you'd get
10 a pop, or a coke or you could get a beer. That's how we would spend when we were off duty. You
11 tend to think about all the times you were off duty rather than the monotonous work of working on
12 planes and helicopters, you know what I mean? You think about those good times when you put
13 your civilian clothes on and went to the village. A bunch of us would jump on a deuce and a half
14 and ride into the village.

15 RV: Did you feel safe?

16 AL: Like I said, we carried our side arms with us, but I don't think I ever felt safe over
17 there, never. There were so many things that were going on with the Viet Cong and they didn't
18 have uniforms on like I told my brothers in World War II. We couldn't tell who the hell was who. I
19 said, 'You guys fought the Germans and the Japanese.' I said, 'They had uniforms.' These guys
20 didn't have no uniforms; they had black pajamas, and everybody had black pajamas!

21 RV: I take it that you were not involved in combat or were you?

22 AL: Not to the degree like an infantryman where you're constantly in combat, no. We got
23 shot at when we flew.

24 RV: Tell me about that. What is your experience or your contact with the enemy what was
25 that like?

26 AL: Well, when you flew say to Saigon and you were approaching Tan Son Nhut, you
27 know there were Viet Cong close by shooting at the planes and you'd see the bullet holes when
28 you landed in the helicopter. I've got pictures, you can see the bullet holes and we had this green
29 tape it was like duct tape. I could never find this tape but we used to use this tape to cover up the
30 bullet holes. You just throw this green tape on there. This tape was excellent. I never could find
31 this tape. The Army had it. The Army had stuff like G.I. Gin; did you ever hear of G.I. Gin?

1 RV: Yes.

2 AL: All right you took that when you had a cold, the next day you woke up and it was
3 gone. I don't know what the heck was in it. Number two, there was APCs. All Purpose Capsule –
4 they were very, very strong aspirins. You took a couple of those when you had a headache –
5 gone. They had better stuff than you could buy in the drug store. They had the mosquito repellant
6 that we put on. That stuff worked! You can't find that. It had DEET and everything else in there.
7 There were things that we had over there. The other thing is we had a lot of shots of course when
8 we went over there of course because of all the disease, typhus and everything, the bubonic
9 plague. We took shots for that. Every Thursday when we went into the mess hall to eat at
10 lunchtime you had to take a quinine pill, which was huge. Sometimes you'd gag on it, it was so big.
11 The taste, I can still taste that quinine pill. You'd take that pill and you had to do it. You had to sign
12 – there'd be a PFC there, a medic or somebody, you'd have to sign that you took it, you had to take
13 it. You put that thing down and swallow some water and you had to take that every week. Then
14 they found out later that quinine would build up in your system and was not good for you. That was
15 after we came home.

16 RV: I want to save until our next conversation some more discussion about the country
17 and your flying and all of that stuff. Let me ask you a couple of specific questions. Did you ever
18 witness or hear about any friendly fire incidents?

19 AL: No.

20 RV: Any experience with medevac or dustoff pilots, did you run into these guys at all or
21 talk to anybody about them?

22 AL: The one incident and I don't know if I sent you that picture, he was a pilot, a lieutenant
23 or a captain. Woodmansee, his name was. He had come in and he was with a different outfit and
24 his CH-21 helicopter, twin rotor went down and our company had to go and get it and bring it back
25 in. I had a picture of him and he's got a silver flight suit on. You can't see him too clear. Anyways
26 a couple of days after I took the picture he had to go out again and he got killed. So when the Wall
27 came to Buffalo years ago they had a little tent there and they had every fatality, or everybody that
28 got killed in Vietnam and I asked them to put Woodmansee up there. He came back and told me
29 where he was from and all that and I remember that officer he got killed a couple of days after he
30 brought his chopper in. He took another chopper and boom, he got killed the second time out.

1 RV: How did you personally function in a zone, it's not technically at that point a war zone,
2 but it essentially is a war zone? How did you feel day-to-day, night-to-night? Did you think about
3 that kind of thing – death?

4 AL: You had a fear because we pulled a lot of guard duty. You pulled guard duty maybe
5 once every two or three weeks. You had a lot of guard.

6 RV: Tell me what that was like.

7 AL: Guard duty, you had a lot of fear there because the Vietnamese, the ARVN troops
8 had the outer perimeter and we had the inner. We would have about five or six guys on the one
9 shift. You'd walk all by yourself, nobody with you and you had a sergeant that would go around, an
10 officer or somebody that would go around in a jeep checking to make sure you didn't go to sleep.
11 Let me tell you something, we didn't sleep. We didn't sleep, but the ARVN did, the outer guards
12 did. They used to get caught all the time sleeping.

13 RV: How did that make you feel?

14 AL: It scared the living hell out of us! That would make you not sleep. That fear you had
15 besides that and snakes, like I told you before. I tell you when I was on guard duty – I was alert.
16 You'd be on four on and four off. So you'd be walking for four hours and then you'd go back and
17 get a little sleep and then you were off that day. You wouldn't have to go to work at the base. So
18 we pulled a lot of guard duty, we had to. We had to make sure our guards. There was only one
19 MP there that was stationed there. Not one maybe three or four. All they would do was be at the
20 gate. So when the Vietnamese came in to work on the base they had these little like a thermos.
21 They'd have their rice and their fish heads in there and he would get a little stick and he'd poke in
22 there to see if there was any grenades or anything in there. They would all be searched everyday.
23 We didn't trust them. You couldn't trust them. Viet Cong were all over.

24 RV: So you were really aware of the fact that you guys were in this country where you
25 could not tell your enemy from your ally?

26 AL: Right! It was a different war!

27 RV: Why do you think they didn't tell you all of this stuff before you went over? You said
28 they really didn't brief you, you were basically learning on the fly over there.

29 AL: No, we didn't get much of an orientation or anything because everything was new and
30 we were one of the first outfits that went over there. I imagine later on like I was watching the TV

1 recently about an outfit of Buffalo that went over to California, Marine Reserve outfit and they spent
2 like a month out in the desert to get themselves ready to go over to Iraq.

3 RV: Wow.

4 AL: You get a month of training; that means a lot.

5 RV: I can imagine that would have really have helped you all to prepare yourselves.

6 AL: Yes!

7 RV: Do you think you could have done your job better if you had been?

8 AL: I think so too. I think if we had a little better knowledge of the governmental situation,
9 if we had a little better knowledge. I mean South Vietnam had their own problems let alone fight
10 the Viet Cong. They were fighting amongst themselves with the religious war. We didn't know
11 that. We didn't get enough orientation on the language and things like that, which I miss today.
12 Later on, a lot of the guys that went over there they picked up the language. We weren't that
13 interested in picking it up. We just wanted to get our year in and get out of there.

14 RV: When you were on guard duty what did they tell you your duty was besides obviously
15 keeping out from the base? What did they say specifically?

16 AL: If a Vietnamese came on the base you warned them once in Vietnamese. You had to
17 say, 'Halt' in Vietnamese I think it was 'Dung Lai' or something like that. If he didn't stop, you shot
18 him.

19 RV: Did you ever have any incidents?

20 AL: I had an incident where a Vietnamese came in on a bike. He kept going and I kept
21 yelling 'Dung Lai, Dung Lai.' He finally halted and he was a little under the weather. He just turned
22 around and went back, but I was ready to shoot him. We had live ammo and that's what we were
23 told to do. You didn't mess around. This guy could come in with a couple of hand grenades and
24 do some serious damage.

25 RV: Right. What was your impression of them in general? What would you say about
26 them?

27 AL: Well, the Viet Cong were so resourceful. I mean when they were out in the field, they
28 could carry everything on their backs. You know Americans we've got to have a supply. We've got
29 to have our cooks, we've got to have our supply sergeants. We've got to have our medics. These
30 guys go out in the field with their black pajamas and enough rice to last them a week. They were a
31 tough enemy. They were very tough. You didn't know who the heck they were. It could have

1 been an 11-year-old kid. It could have been a woman; they had women, a lot of women in the Viet
2 Cong. It was hard to trust anybody, hard to trust anybody. Even going to the village, we had no
3 rear lines over there. It wasn't like World War II. I used to argue with my brothers that this was
4 different kind of war. The same as Iraq – it's a different kind of war! Those guys are in your
5 backyard.

6 RV: So your brothers would disagree with you?

7 AL: Yes, we'd fight. Every once in a while they would go to the back. You fought in the
8 front lines and then you go in the back, right?

9 RV: There was a clear rear.

10 AL: Yes, I've read a lot of statistics about the Vietnamese War. In World War II the actual
11 fighting at Iwo Jima and that, you're talking about 10 days or 12 days. These wars were like short.
12 In Vietnam those guys were at war every day. Those choppers would be out every day. Infantry
13 was there every day; you know what I'm saying?

14 RV: Yes, absolutely. It was a different kind of war.

15 AL: Yes a whole different kind of war and World War II guys do not understand it – they do
16 not understand Vietnam.

17 RV: Is there a divide between the Vietnam veterans and veterans?

18 AL: Tremendous! When I came home like I told you I didn't want to join anything because
19 the World War II vets they ran the legion, they ran the VFW. Now you're starting to get a few
20 Vietnam veterans that are starting to join, but nobody wanted to join. The only thing they join today
21 is the Vietnam Veterans of America because everybody is in the same wavelength with them. The
22 things that happened to us, Agent Orange and all that stuff, that's our problem. That wasn't a
23 World War II problem. Same thing with these guys coming home today. They're going to have
24 their own problems coming home from Afghanistan and Iraq. They're going to have problems.

25 RV: It's very symptomatic warfare.

26 AL: Right. Different kind of war, different kind of atmosphere. You know, World War I
27 when my dad was in, they got gassed. They had mustard gas and stuff, that was the big thing for
28 World War I. World War II you got shell shock, which happened to go in to the post-traumatic
29 syndrome that we had. These guys are going to have that post-traumatic syndrome too. You're
30 taking a Reserve guy that goes to meetings once a month and you're going to throw him in a war
31 zone. Maybe the guy's 40 years old. My son's boss is 48 years old, he got called over there. This

1 guy is from Rochester. A lieutenant colonel and he's in the green zone. I mean he's right there in
2 the middle of everything. That's something, believe me.

3 RV: Well Tony why don't we take a break for today? We'll go ahead and pick up another
4 time. So we'll go ahead and end this session right now. Thanks a lot.

Interview with Anthony LaRusso
Session 3 of 3
March 3, 2005

1 RV: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I'm continuing my oral history interview. Today is March
2 3, 2005. I am speaking with Tony LaRusso in Texas Tech University Southwest Collections
3 Special Collections Library Interview Room in Lubbock, Texas. Tony you are again in Angola, New
4 York?

5 AL: Right.

6 RV: It's a little after 1:00 PM, five after 1:00 PM Central Standard Time. Tony, we had
7 talked just briefly, just a second ago that you had some things you wanted to add, touch on some
8 subjects that we looked at in our previous conversations. Why don't you go ahead and do that?

9 AL: When we first got to Vietnam, $\frac{3}{4}$ of our company went to Vung Tau. The other $\frac{1}{4}$
10 stayed at Tan Son Nhut and they were part of our company. They were mainly a supply group that
11 was in Saigon. When we used to go up there to get parts and stuff, we would go to our unit up
12 there.

13 RV: So these guys were permanently stationed there at Tan Son Nhut?

14 AL: Right, but they were in the 330th Trans Company. A little background that I found on
15 the Internet recently under USARV Transportation Elements in Vietnam. This will give you a little
16 more insight. 'The 330th transportation company is one of the largest and most versatile aircraft
17 maintenance companies in the Army. It is operated in Vung Tau since 22 April '63,' which
18 corresponds when we got there. 'Placing it among the oldest support companies in Vietnam
19 commanded by,' I don't know this fellow, but 'commanded by Michael Kimloc, a Checkmate.' That
20 apparently became their name after we left. We never used 'Checkmates.' But the Checkmates
21 was their nickname, support over 1,000 aircraft. Projects included in the 330th work schedule are
22 the repair of the UH-1 huey and the AH-1G Cobra tail booms and fabrication of mounts and
23 controls for the Nighthawk weapons system. Now, that happened after we left. They became a
24 part of the 765th Transportation Battalion. That's why I had a rough time trying to find it. I would
25 always look up 330th, but they became part of the 765th Transportation as more and more
26 companies started coming over there and they organized battalions. At that time we were just part
27 of MAC-V, that's all we were, an advisory role. Then after it started heating up and things
28 changed. But getting back to my buddies.

1 RV: Tell me about the people you formed the closest relationships with there.

2 AL: We were a very, very close group we did everything together. We played together,
3 we played sports together, we went to the movies together, everything together. These guys were
4 like brothers to me. The first one, my closest friend was Ed Wargolet, W-A-G-O-L-E-T. And Eddie
5 was from West Ellis, Wisconsin. You're going to see that most of these guys were from all over,
6 but mainly from the North Northeast. By the way, except for Wargolet the rest of these fellows are
7 all draftees. He was the only RA. He was a Spec-5. Then there was Duke Snyder, we called him
8 Duke, but his name was Phares, P-H-A-R-E-S, but we called him Duke after the baseball player.
9 He was from West Chester, PA. Then we had Toby Campbell, he was from Littleton,
10 Massachusetts. Felix Esposito from Bridgeport, Connecticut, Bob Cerrito from Connecticut, Joe
11 Cyr from Massachusetts and John Derier from New Jersey, Saddle Brook. I don't know if you're
12 familiar with Saddle Brook.

13 RV: I've heard of it.

14 AL: That's where he was from. But most of these guys all worked in the aircraft industry.
15 For instance, Snyder was an engineman and he later worked with Northwest. He retired from
16 Northwest Airlines just a few years ago. Toby Campbell, he was another engineman, I think he's
17 still working, but he's at Logan in Boston. He works in Boston. Esposito worked at Hamilton
18 Standard, which was an engine company in Connecticut. Serrito was also from Connecticut. Joe
19 Cyr and I we were the closest because he was a supermarket manager and I worked in a
20 supermarket when I got drafted, while I was going to college. John Derier he worked with Flying
21 Tigers in New Jersey and New York in that area. He was a mechanic for Flying Tigers. So you
22 can see that these guys were mainly aircraft people and that's why when they got drafted, where
23 do you think they put them? Right into the aircraft portion. It made sense, except for me and Joe
24 Cyr and myself. We certainly weren't aircraft people, but we learned.

25 RV: Yes.

26 AL: So we got over there and our first CO was Captain Eugene Diamond, who was an
27 aviator and he was there for about I would say six or seven months and then he was transferred to
28 another company and we got Major George Sullivan who was our CO and he was an aviator [and]
29 airborne. These officers we had were outstanding and they were the nicest people. overseas it's a
30 different story. You don't have all that spit and polish that you do in the States. You went to the
31 club, you drank with them, you played sports. We did a lot of things together. It wasn't so much of

1 a difference. The only thing was at night they went back to the Pacific Hotel in the village and we
2 went in our barracks. The non-commissioned officers and the enlisted men.

3 RV: So there was no real divide between the two of you or actually between the enlisted
4 and the officers in your company?

5 AL: Right. We were at one station and you know we were always together. It wasn't a
6 case, like in the States when the officers stayed off post and the enlisted men were on the base
7 and stuff like that, unless you were married and then you were off-post too. You got housing
8 allowances and that. Our first sergeant was Monroe Aaron. He was an old-timer.

9 RV: How do you spell his last name?

10 AL: A-A-R-O-N. He was number one in the NCOs obviously in the whole Army because
11 he was 'A-A.' We used to kid him about that. Then we had Lieutenant Bob Kaercher, K-A-E-R-C-
12 H-E-R. You'll see their names in those orders that I sent you if you want the spelling Robert
13 Kaercher. He was an aeronautical engineer and he went to Notre Dame. We were very close with
14 him, too. He was one of the good officers. We had Lieutenant Phillip Gatz from New Hampshire.
15 He was a schoolteacher and he got drafted and one thing about Lieutenant Gatz, when we flew
16 with him in light planes, he was a light plane man, he wasn't a helicopter. He would fly as high as
17 he could. This poor guy he was schoolteacher, he wanted to get back to teaching school and he
18 was drafted. So we used to call him 'Mile High Gatz' (laughter). We liked to fly with him because
19 he didn't [fly] close to the ground. He just wanted to get home, that's all. It was interesting too;
20 even the doctor that was assigned to our post, [I] had to go to the sick call one time. I was talking
21 to him and he was another one, he got drafted too. He couldn't wait to get out of there. He said,
22 'I'm like you; I can't wait to get out of the service.' It was a big difference with the draftees and the
23 RAs, you know?

24 RV: Did you all joke about that? I mean this is a serious business we're talking about.

25 AL: Right, like I said we joked about everything. I mean, 'You're going on guard duty
26 tonight? I'll see you in the morning, or will I'? It was so common that sense of humor is what kept
27 you going. You're laughing all the time, we played a lot of sports. All the guys that I hung around
28 with we were all sports nuts. So we started a volleyball league and there were three teams. There
29 were the enlisted men, the NCOs and the officers. We played every Thursday afternoon after we'd
30 get off duty. We'd all go over and play each other. The loser would have to buy drinks in the
31 winning team's club. We had such a good team with Ed Wargolet, he was about 6'3" and John

1 Derier was about 6'2" in volleyball if you've got a pretty tall group and you could spike pretty good,
2 you could usually win. So every Thursday we'd play and we'd beat the NCOs every week, we'd
3 play them and then the next group would be the officers. Well we were beating everybody so bad
4 that all of a sudden on Thursday afternoon you'd see a chopper coming in or a light plane or a
5 Caribou landing on our strip with these ringers. You know what a ringer is?

6 RV: Yes.

7 AL: They'd bring in some 6'2" officer from Saigon or Da Nang or someplace to bolster up
8 their team.

9 RV: So they would fly in volleyball players for your Thursday afternoon games?

10 AL: Yes (laughter). I mean you talk about like World War II and these guys that got into
11 the special services, the sports, the golfers and the football players and in World War II, you saw a
12 lot of that. Except for Ted Williams, who was obviously a jet pilot you didn't see much of that.
13 There was a lot of that in the service, where the guy was a good athlete and certain groups would
14 try to get a hold of him, especially in the States. When I was at Ft. Eustis we had excellent teams.
15 At Ft. Benning we had one of the best football teams in all the Army posts. Being interested in
16 sports, I would go to these games and watch these teams and some of these commanding officers
17 they were big on sports. So they would try to get as many good athletes on post as they can. So
18 that was our volleyball experience and a lot of fun and everybody looked forward to it. The officers
19 hated to come, they had to come to our club to drink. And have to buy us drinks. Can you imagine
20 a captain or a major buying drinks for a PFC or a Spec-4 or Spec-5?

21 RV: I bet you all enjoyed that?

22 AL: Yes we got a big kick out of that. We had a lot of closeness.

23 RV: It sounds like sports played a huge role for you all for morale and just getting through
24 the year?

25 AL: Absolutely, absolutely.

26 RV: And humor as well.

27 AL: Humor and sports, in our particular case it was a monotonous boring place to be.
28 You're in the middle of nowhere with 500 soldiers and we didn't have any, there was no nurses or
29 no WACs. It was just guys. The sports, it took up a lot of our time and reading the paper and
30 seeing how the baseball teams were doing. The baseball and the football, you know. You were
31 there a year so you went through the entire year of sports year. Baseball, football, hockey,

1 everything. Guys from the Northeast, we all like football, basketball. It was all like the same
2 sports. So it made the time go and you didn't think about the war. You didn't think about the things
3 that were going on and the heat. You didn't think about the heat. We'd be out there playing
4 volleyball sweating our rear ends off, but who cared? We were trying to win the game!

5 RV: Tony, tell me about any racial issues that you witnessed or saw or experienced in one
6 way or the other.

7 AL: Like I mentioned last time, there really wasn't. At our post there wasn't a lot of blacks.
8 There was maybe in our outfit maybe 10 or 15. There was a lot of guys from Hawaii there, which
9 were like Chinese and Japanese mixtures. They all kept together and we all got along. I don't
10 remember any problems that way, either. The Southern boys got along with the northern boys.
11 You're in one spot; you've got to get along. You can't hate the guy next to you. If you were a pilot
12 or an officer you sure as heck didn't want that Spec-5 crew chief to get mad at you and vice versa.
13 The pilot is piloting that aircraft and you know you depended on one another.

14 RV: There has to be a measure of trust.

15 AL: Absolutely, absolutely. I mean some of those crew chiefs, some of those helicopters
16 and planes would go down and these guys would get them flying again. They were amazing!

17 RV: Did you all keep any pets?

18 AL: There was a couple dogs on the post. You know the Vietnamese, they used to eat
19 dogs.

20 RV: Still do.

21 AL: I don't know if you knew that.

22 RV: They still do eat them.

23 AL: And also rats. They used to catch these big rats in these wire contraptions and then
24 they would get a piece of hard wire. I can still hear those rats making that noise. They would poke
25 them and kill them and eat them.

26 RV: So they would string them up basically?

27 AL: No, they would catch them in these traps, these wire traps and then they would just
28 poke them with a straight piece of wire to kill them. Just poke them to death.

29 RV: They would cook them, I presume?

30 AL: Right, they would cook them. But we wouldn't want anything to have to do with that.

31 RV: Did you ever try any interesting dishes?

1 AL: Well when we went into the village [Vung Tau] or in Saigon and the thing that we liked
2 was Chinese soup. Chinese soup had like everything in it. Pieces of shrimp, it was good and we
3 would order it. We weren't allowed to buy any...in the restaurants they have like fresh salad with
4 lettuce or anything because they grew all that stuff with human waste. And we were told
5 everything had to be cooked. The soup obviously was cooked so we could eat it.

6 RV: What did you think of the Vietnamese civilians and of the country itself?

7 AL: After a while when you're there, you know they're taking advantage of you. You know
8 they're always trying to get something out of you. Whether it's the bar girls drinking the green tea
9 or it's the marketplace. You had to haggle over anything you bought. Everything was money. It
10 was all based on money. We mentioned before about the prostitutes, the prostitutes – they were
11 like the higher end of the social scale because they had so much money. You get a [girl] prostitute
12 from a small family, a poor family and she becomes a prostitute. After a while she's giving money
13 to her family and they're working for her. They made good money over there when the Americans
14 were there because the Americans always overpaid for everything. I mean the Vietnamese could
15 go to a house of prostitution and pay maybe 20 piasters. An American would have to pay 100.

16 RV: What is that in dollars roughly?

17 AL: Well at that time to give an idea on the post like I said, 73 piasters for a dollar, for a
18 green back, where on the black market you got 120. It all depended on the black market and the
19 rate that was given on payday.

20 RV: That's still pretty cheap.

21 AL: Oh, yes. Very cheap. Everything was cheap but we were making 100 dollars a
22 month. I was sending an \$18.75 bond home every month. So you lived on 80 bucks a month. Of
23 course everything, like I said before a can of beer at the EM club was 10 cents. A mixed drink was
24 15. I mean, you know. A bottle of booze was a buck and a half. Cigarettes were 10 cents a pack.

25 RV: What did you think of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, the ARVN, or did you ever
26 cross paths with any of these guys?

27 AL: In some of the pictures you'll see they used to come on the post and then they'd fly
28 out in Caribous and that and in some of their own planes. The paratroopers and the Tiger Division,
29 they had good divisions. Then they had some people that weren't that good. On guard duty when
30 they had the ARVNs doing the outer perimeter. They would fall asleep. They weren't very
31 disciplined. Like I said we were on guard duty we would always be on our toes because they'd be

1 asleep. So the enemy could get in. But I met some real good Vietnamese enlisted men and
2 officers in the year I was there. Pretty sharp.

3 RV: Did you think that these people were, the Vietnamese civilians or more so the South
4 Vietnamese military, do you think they were capable of defending South Vietnam, defending their
5 home, protecting themselves against any incursion from the North or any one else?

6 AL: I think they could have held their own with the Viet Cong that were down in the South.
7 But when the North Vietnamese later on in the war when they brought their regulars in and some
8 Chinese. I think they would have overwhelmed the South, even though the South's Army was
9 larger than the Viet Cong at the time we were there. They didn't have a large-scale infiltration yet.
10 So they could have held on for quite a while I think.

11 RV: Tony, did you ever get an R&R?

12 AL: No, I never left the country. Some of the guys went to Hong Kong. That was the most
13 popular place.

14 RV: Why didn't you get one?

15 AL: Well I didn't have the money. I mean when you went to Hong Kong you had to have
16 some money. You had to have 200 or 300 bucks or more because guys bought cameras and all
17 other stuff over there. Stuff was cheap, but the only R&R like I said we flew up, Joe Cyr and I flew
18 up to Da Lat. That was up in the mountains, like a three-day pass. We enjoyed ourselves for
19 those three days, it was nice and cool up there. We had a room. We even had the Continental
20 Hotel in Saigon when we went another weekend. Things were really cheap up there, you know. A
21 couple hundred piasters, you could have dinner and stay the night in nice rooms.

22 RV: Tell me about the places you flew, you know when you said you would actually fly
23 around the country.

24 AL: Well, we would fly to go pick up...we had a salvage yard down at Vung Tau. We
25 would bring back pieces of aircraft that were shot down or crashed. We would bring that stuff back
26 because we could use it, a lot of that stuff. The airframe, you know you could use those parts,
27 other parts of the Hueys and parts of the light planes that went down. So we'd just go out
28 wherever we had to go and pick up those parts and bring them in. Sometimes they'd use a CH-34,
29 which is a bit bigger helicopter to pick up with a sling, to pick up like an engine or something and
30 move it. So it actually could pick up a jeep. It was that strong and powerful. So you had to go out
31 and get the salvageable material and bring it back in or go up to Saigon and get parts and

1 salvageable stuff. Tan Son Nhut was getting real large at this time. They were building up. Later
2 on in the war it became the busiest airport in the world at one time, so many flights in and out.

3 RV: What did you think of Saigon?

4 AL: Saigon was a pretty large city. There were two parts, Saigon and Cholon. Cholon
5 was the poorer, Chinese portion of the city. We stayed in Saigon usually and we'd go up and down
6 Tu Do Street, which was one of their main drags. They had all these flowers in the market places.
7 You could buy anything on Tu Do Street, anything. There were cigarettes, American cigarettes,
8 American booze. A funny story was when we first got our jungle boots when we first got there...I
9 might have said this before, when we first got there we had black issue boots. The same boots
10 everybody wore. Then the Army came out with these jungle boots, which were lighter, like canvas
11 type boot. Before we got them at Vung Tau we saw them in Saigon on black market. In the
12 marketplace, reason being when the ships came in from American with all these materials, the
13 Vietnamese would unload them and steal it. They were terrible the same as in Korea. Korea was
14 the same thing, a lot of theft going on with the Army. But like I said, they took advantage of us all
15 they could.

16 RV: Did you resent that at the time?

17 AL: At the time, no. But after I left there I would think about the things that happened and
18 so much corruption over there that I didn't realize it was going on at the time. There was times
19 when the American soldiers had to get permission to go to a province with the province chief or
20 else pay some money out to somebody. So this was what we found later on because we were on
21 a small scale at the time. There was only 16,000 soldiers, everything was small scale. As the war
22 went on it got bigger and bigger. Things changed. It was like a big picture after that.

23 RV: Let me ask you a couple more questions before we leave Vietnam. Did you ever
24 experience incidents that you remember that brought up a lot of fear?

25 AL: Yes, a couple times.

26 RV: Can you cover that?

27 AL: The time we flew to Da Lat, we were in a little Otter, four-seater. Lieutenant Gatz was
28 flying and we were pretty high, like I said. But all of a sudden the pressure gauge started going
29 down. We were losing oil pressure. It could have been a leak; it could have been a lot of things. It
30 could have just been the instruments. But the lieutenant pointed to it. We were in the back, Joe
31 Cyr and I, and there was another Spec-4 in the front. We got scared because we could see that

1 gauge. We made it into Da Lat and then he got it repaired when we got there. But that was one
2 time. Another time we were coming back from Saigon in a Caribou. Now these Caribous they
3 were great planes and they were just coming out at that time. DeHaviland made out of Canada
4 and this captain that was flying, he said, 'Look it, I've got to do some contour flying.' I said, 'What's
5 that?' He said, 'We're going to go right over the tree tops'. We flew from Saigon to Vung Tau,
6 which was about 80 miles by road, probably less by air, right over the treetops at full speed. You
7 could look down and see the tops of the trees right below you. So a little bit of fear there, yes. A
8 couple of alerts that we had, the sirens would go off at night, you know you'd be sleeping and you
9 didn't know if it was a drill or an attack. We'd go out there and jump in our foxholes and get our M-
10 14s and go out there.

11 RV: Did you leave there feeling pretty confident about your ability as a soldier? What did
12 this do for you personally as you were leaving there in 1964?

13 AL: I'll tell you it matured me quite a bit. I mean a kid from a small town like Angola that
14 never went any place; I was never much of a traveler. All of a sudden you're in a country
15 thousands and thousands of miles away and you're with a bunch of guys that you didn't grow up
16 with. They're all new to you, you just met them it was quite a shock. It made me a more mature
17 person. It made me see a lot of the other part of the world, how other people live and you began to
18 appreciate America more. Little things like ice cream and fresh milk, we never had any fresh milk.
19 The only place you could get fresh milk in the whole country was at the USO in Saigon. They had
20 ice cream there and they had fresh milk. We always had powdered milk. I was never a big milk
21 drinker, but boy when you don't have any milk and I like it in my coffee and it's all powdered. It
22 tastes a lot different.

23 RV: So what was it like leaving Vietnam for you? How did you feel on that flight out of
24 there?

25 AL: I couldn't wait to get home.

26 RV: Did you fly a civilian flight out?

27 AL: Flying Tigers with regular stewardesses. When we went over we went MATs and we
28 were served these little trays in those sling seats. That's how we ate on the plane and then coming
29 home, Flying Tigers with the meals and everything. Quite a difference. We wanted to come home
30 Pan Am, Pan Am was like the top of the line. But we wound up with Flying Tigers and we flew into

1 Seattle. We were supposed to land at Anchorage, but we didn't; we went to Seattle. Then we get
2 to Seattle, we had to go through customs. Can you imagine? We had to go through customs.

3 RV: Wow.

4 AL: I had all those black and white photos, most of them I've sent to Texas Tech. But the
5 customs they went through all those pictures. You couldn't have any pictures of prostitutes and
6 stuff. So they would go through all that, look for dope and stuff. They checked us out pretty good.
7 Then we went from there to Travis.

8 RV: What was the mood like on the flight home?

9 AL: Oh, my God it was like heaven. When we got off at Travis and off the plane
10 everybody kissed the ground, the asphalt, the hot asphalt.

11 RV: Wow!

12 AL: I tell you it was great to be home. I can still remember those days of coming home
13 and all happy. The last 30 days I was there, the last month, which would have been the month of
14 March of '64, me and my buddies that were going home, we never left the post. We and watched
15 movies every night. We wouldn't go to the village, we wouldn't go anyplace that we didn't have to
16 go.

17 RV: Right, you were staying safe.

18 AL: Yes, right.

19 RV: Everybody was doing that?

20 AL: Nobody wanted to get hurt.

21 RV: Was everyone doing that?

22 AL: The ones that were going home, yes. At this time their first replacements were
23 coming in too.

24 RV: What did you tell these guys?

25 AL: We had more stories for them, scared the living hell out of them. It's the same thing
26 that happened to us when we got there. Of course like I said, we were one of the first outfits in
27 Vung Tau so we sort of set the standard. Now these other guys coming over they're just out of
28 school.

29 RV: Did you have any incidents when you arrived back to the United States anything from
30 the public, any negativity?

1 AL: The only negativity was the World War II vets didn't take to us too much. My brothers
2 were in the VFW and the Legion. I had a friend that invited me to join the VFW in '65. At first
3 because there was no other Vietnam veterans in there. So I was kind of skeptical, but I did join
4 after a lot of prodding. I never got active because most of the guys that ran it were the Korean and
5 World War II vets. So most of us didn't really get mixed up into it. We just kept quiet, nobody
6 bragged about being in Vietnam. I think the last few years I've been more proud that I'm a Vietnam
7 veteran than I was all those other years. I just didn't tell anybody.

8 RV: What about as the war heated up and you're here at home watching this happen?
9 What were your thoughts and feelings as you watched all these events?

10 AL: Like Dan Rather said last night on the newscast on CBS, 'This was the first war that
11 came into your living room.' So there I was and I'd always look for scenes of Saigon or scenes of
12 Vung Tau that I was familiar with. I'd watch the news every night to see if that was the area where
13 I was stationed or the area where I had been. For a while I did see a lot of familiar sights. But then
14 as the war went on I didn't see them anymore.

15 RV: Did you support the United States policy as the war went on?

16 AL: I would consider myself when I got back I wasn't crazy about the war. I just felt that
17 we got sandbagged and we didn't really have any reason to be there. It was like Korea. It was like
18 Vietnam and it's like Iraq today. It's like a personal battle between neighbors and we're mixed up
19 in it. Iraq is mainly a religious war. There's a lot of bad feelings toward America because we
20 backed Israel and stuff like that. You could see it, some of the propaganda in the Arabian nations.
21 They hate us because we go along with Israel. It's crazy.

22 RV: Let me talk about a couple things about Vietnam and we'll talk about today. So you
23 didn't discuss your Vietnam experience very much initially?

24 AL: No.

25 RV: When did you start talking more and why did that happen?

26 AL: I would say in the '70s because the war was really starting to heat up. Vietnam was
27 all over the news and the papers and people knew about Vietnam. Where in the beginning, people
28 from Angola...nobody knew where Vietnam was. No one was ever stationed there, no one had
29 ever been there. So it was all brand new.

30 RV: So then you were prompted to talk about it once the war had ended?

1 AL: Right and then we started talking about our experiences because people knew. Then
2 all these veterans coming back. You had guys from Evans that got killed there. I mean the town of
3 Evans was where I lived. Three or four boys got killed over there and it was in the paper. People
4 started realizing what was going on because these guys are getting killed same as in Iraq. So
5 that's what happened as the war went on more and more people and more and more people were
6 being sent over there. Things changed people realized it was big war, bigger than you thought in
7 the beginning.

8 RV: Did you have a difficult time transitioning to civilian life at all?

9 AL: Yes I had to watch my speech because every other word was a swear word. A couple
10 times at home I let out and I shouldn't have done it. I apologized to my mom and my dad and my
11 family. I had to get used to not swearing. I went to a play, my niece was in a play at the high
12 school, probably a month or so after and somebody came out of the side of the stage with a gun
13 and they shot, and you know what I did, I jumped in the aisle. The sound, I heard the sound a lot,
14 that shooting. You know I wasn't used to it and all of a sudden, boom. So it was a transition, there
15 was a transition of the weather. You know you're in 100-degree heat and all of a sudden you're in
16 60 or 50 degrees, it's a little different. Snow again, which we didn't have a good year. I never saw
17 snow a good year while I was over there. I was actually away from home for 13 months. Because
18 I was out in California for a month and then 12 months over there.

19 RV: What did you think of the anti-war movement, Tony?

20 AL: There was a lot of it going on and Tom Hayden and Fonda...and I always liked Jane
21 Fonda as an actress. I just thought that she overdid it like everybody else did. I still think she's
22 fine actress, but she just overdid it with this anti-war, going over there and all that. I wouldn't say I
23 was like Kerry, throwing all my medals and all that. I wasn't that big, but I just didn't like the war. It
24 was a crazy war and I hated to see people getting killed over there and maimed, and there's guys
25 that live in Angola here still with crutches from Vietnam. There's two fellows Steve Banko in
26 Buffalo who's the most decorated Vietnam veteran from New York State and he works for HUD.
27 He's in charge of the HUD Federal Agency in Buffalo. He'd be a great guy to get an interview from
28 because he saw a lot of action. He was with the 1st Air Cav. He saw a lot of action and him and I
29 are good friends. Every time I run into him he goes 'LaRusso, you were in Vung Tau; that was an
30 R&R place,' (laughter). He said, 'You know, I was there after I got shot and they put me in the
31 hospital.' There was a big hospital there. He said, 'Yes, I wound up in Vung Tau, too.' He says, 'I

1 know more about Vung Tau, I spent a lot of time there.' He got machine-gunned. He's a writer,
2 he's written a lot of articles about Vietnam. He's a staunch defender of Vietnam veterans. He
3 does a lot for the Vietnam veterans. I tell you, you want to get a good oral history, he'd be
4 excellent.

5 RV: Can you spell his name to me Tony?

6 AL: Banko, B-a-n-k-o. Steven Banko.

7 RV: All right let me ask you a couple of other questions about the war. When the United
8 States left Vietnam in '73, did you think that there was peace with honor? Did you think at that
9 point we had done what we needed to do?

10 AL: Well the pictures of those people on top of the embassy and there was a lot of that. I
11 mean everybody was trying to get out of there. They were dumping equipment and all kinds of
12 stuff going on according to the articles I've read. All the tanks and planes they couldn't get out of
13 there, they just took off. No, I thought we maybe should have done a little more to finish the job
14 over there. The thing that I really appreciate about the Vietnam veteran – and I belong to the
15 Vietnam Veterans of America is the fact that they are trying to make these guys from Iraq feel
16 better than we did. You know, when they're coming home. They actually go out and organize
17 people to meet these veterans. Even myself, I see these kids coming home and we have an Air
18 Force unit in Niagara Falls. It's pretty big. There's quite a few Air Force veterans around here.
19 You know we talk to them and try to encourage them and stuff because we didn't get that.

20 RV: Right. Do you think that's one of the big lessons learned from Vietnam?

21 AL: Absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, this country does not know how to treat its veterans. I
22 get so mad the way things are going now with the veterans.

23 RV: Do you think the government does not do a good job taking care of veterans?

24 AL: Absolutely not. It's getting worse.

25 RV: Now is that just the Vietnam vets or is that just across the board?

26 AL: All veterans.

27 RV: What do you see that they could be doing better or what are the major problems?

28 AL: Well I think with the health a lot of these things the veterans got because of their
29 duties. I mean I know a veteran here in Angola that got shot in Vietnam and he's on crutches.
30 Everything he has to get, he has to fight for. He has to go and argue with people. He has to go to
31 the VA and fight. He shouldn't have to do that!

1 RV: Right.

2 AL: This guy has got a Purple Heart with three clusters. You're going to give him a tough
3 time? You don't do that! I'm not saying give him the moon. You can't give him the moon. You
4 can't build him a house. You know, but Jesus, take care of the guy and his family. I mean, this
5 guy's wife has got to go out and work, and he can't work. The guy's on crutches. He's been on
6 crutches for years. So he gets depressed. I talk to him all the time. He's got a lot of depression,
7 hates the government.

8 RV: What about you, Tony? Have you ever experienced any kind of incidents with the VA
9 or have you had any kind of PTSD type incidents?

10 AL: No, the biggest thing I have with the VA my brother the World War II vet, he's 81
11 years old and I take him in [to the VA]. I sort of take care of him and I bring him into the VA and
12 he's always bitching about the VA. You don't do this and you don't do that. So the experience I've
13 got is, he is a World War II vet that was over there for four year in World War II. He was in Italy
14 and he was in Germany and you know four years of his life. I mean the kid was 18 years old when
15 he went in. 22 years old he's coming back and that's all he saw was action over there. I mean,
16 God, that's got to mean something to the rest of your life. He gets flashbacks to World War II. It's
17 just I don't know. He tells me about the things that happened. He can't hear anymore and he
18 blames it on the artillery and the mortar. He was in the tank outfit and how many times a round
19 was shot at the tank. He was telling me one day and I said, 'Why don't you put a claim in? You
20 can put a claim in today.' He said, 'All my buddies are dead.' You know, you've got to have
21 verification. Usually it's your buddies; all his buddies are dead. He said, 'Who's going to speak up
22 for me?' Too late now. He gets, my brother he was self-employed. He used to be a tile setter, he
23 made good money when he was working. Well now he can't work anymore, he's kind of old and
24 he's got arthritis and stuff. He lives on – he gets 400 dollars a month social security and he gets
25 400 from the government from the VA, which is sort of a pension. You know his income was so
26 low, he lives on 800 dollars a month. Is that a way to treat a guy that was in the service, overseas
27 for four years? I mean World War II those guys would go to Camp Dix or Ft. Dix in New Jersey.
28 They'd take their Basic and boy they were over there right away. They didn't have schools like we
29 did. We went to school. Those guys were over, they had on-the-job training. That's not the way to
30 treat them, believe me.

1 RV: What do you think about your Vietnam experience looking back at it today? What did
2 you most learn about yourself and is there anything that you would change?

3 AL: No, I had the chance to go to OCS, to be an officer. It's a lot better to be an officer
4 than to be an enlisted man by far. But by the same token, I would have had to sign up for four
5 more years. I wasn't about to do that. I wanted to get home, I wanted to buy a car. I had never
6 had a car because I was going to college. I take the bus to school, which was in Buffalo. The first
7 thing I did, I saved my money. I sent a bond home. I went out and bought a car for 500 bucks. It
8 was a Ford Thunderbird and boy I loved that car! It was used, it wasn't new. That was the first
9 thing I wanted to buy and then I went to work. I should have finished college and I never did, but I
10 should have finished. Of course I had good jobs. When I worked at Bethlehem Steel I had a good
11 job; I was in the office making good money. Then when I got the job with NFTA, I was the head of
12 a division. I made good money and I got a good pension from the NFTA. So it was a state agency
13 and the state pensions are very, very good up here.

14 RV: Tony, today do you watch movies on Vietnam, read books about Vietnam?

15 AL: Yes in fact I just watched a movie that I watched years ago with Robert DeNiro.

16 RV: *Deer Hunter*?

17 AL: *Deer Hunter*, excellent, excellent movie. Very realistic, very similar to the
18 Pennsylvania, I think it was around Pittsburgh or someplace. Very similar to our area, which was
19 Bethlehem Steel. Bethlehem Steel in Buffalo at one time had 20,000 employees. Just this plant in
20 Buffalo, it was huge. When I started the in '66 you can't believe how huge this plant was and now
21 it's nothing. It went bankrupt.

22 RV: So you can identify with what was going on there in the movie. These guys were
23 hard lived when they got back home and how they felt

24 AL: Right, same thing, exactly the same. When you were a kid growing up as you got a
25 job in the steel plant it was a good job because you made good money. It was very, very good.

26 RV: What other movies have you seen that you liked or disliked?

27 AL: *Apocalypse Now*, that was pretty good. There was a lot of crazy things in there.
28 Things that I never saw in Vietnam. I would say the *Deer Hunter* was about the best realistic,
29 except the part where the one fellow walking when he stayed over, nobody wanted to stay over
30 there. Everybody came home when there was a chance to come home.

31 RV: What do you think about Vietnam today? Would you ever want to go back?

1 AL: Yes.

2 RV: Why?

3 AL: I want to go to Vung Tau, I want to see how big it is now. I want to go back to the little
4 sleepy town that it was when I was there and the beaches. The beaches are the same you could
5 see the outline of the beaches were the same. They might call them different names, but I'd like to
6 go to Vung Tau. Not so much Saigon because it's just a big city. That probably hasn't changed
7 much either but Vung Tau according to what I've read it's really changed.

8 RV: It's a big tourist destination.

9 AL: Yes, I imagine they come from all over the country to go there.

10 RV: Tony, have you been to the Wall in Washington?

11 AL: No, but I was at the Wall, the one that travels it came to Buffalo.

12 RV: What was your experience there?

13 AL: Well there were a couple of names that I knew of guys that got killed there. What
14 surprised me was all the people used to bring candles and memorials, the same thing they do at
15 the Wall in Washington. They did it in Buffalo, same thing. Pictures. There was quite a few that
16 got killed from this area. In fact, they have a wall in Buffalo with the names of all the people that
17 got killed from this area.

18 RV: Was it a good experience for you to see that?

19 AL: Well, it was everything that I thought it was going to be. The Wall is unique because
20 those names are on there. I mean there's no other memorial like that you see everybody that got
21 killed there. I see it on television and I see it every Memorial Day and to me, it's the most moving
22 of all the memorials, it is. Even the people that weren't in the service that go there are the wives
23 and children of the veterans. They're really moved by that, especially when they see their father's
24 name up there or uncle or some relative.

25 RV: Tony, what do you think the United States learned from its Vietnam experience?

26 AL: Well, it was a war that was a lot different than any other war. When you try to talk to a
27 World War II veteran they just do not get it. They don't understand the difference in the wars. It's
28 more of an individual war, it wasn't all these tanks coming at you or more of an air war. It was a
29 helicopter war or a squad would get in a helicopter and go from here to there air mobile that was a
30 big thing up in Vietnam. Over there, you marched and you were in file and everybody's got
31 uniforms on and you're fighting guys with uniforms on. There was something I read one time...say

1 during World War II especially with the Germans. Say if your plane got shot down and you were
2 behind the lines, you could get back to your own line because if you could speak German. But in
3 Vietnam if you got shot down, you were dead. How are you going to get back? You stick out like a
4 sore thumb. So it was a different type of war. There was small action, small units were
5 instrumental. It was just a different type of war. It's the same type of war Iraq is fighting. They
6 probably learned from Vietnam too, the Iraqis because that's what they did. American couldn't
7 realize when we went through Iraq how fast they got through Baghdad, remember that? Days and
8 days and they went, 'Oh, they don't have an Army.' Well you know what they did? They took off
9 their uniforms and they melted into the countryside. Now all they're doing is skirmishes. They're
10 blowing up people and that's all they're doing. But those Army guys, they're still there; they're still
11 in the military. They're just not dressed, that's all. The organization that they're doing, bombing in
12 one place one day, the next day another one. All it is, is beating us down. People are getting sick
13 of it. The public is getting sick of it. They're blaming Bush for it. If you see all of Bush's ratings the
14 biggest ratings that have gone down is the war.

15 RV: What would you tell the younger generation about Vietnam? If you had to walk into a
16 high school or college classroom what would you say?

17 AL: If I talked to the younger people about the war I would tell them that I think these kids
18 today...when I talk to my sons – I have four sons. When I talk to them, they don't want to go in the
19 service. They're 100% against it. They're 100% about getting drafted. They're 100% about going
20 into the service. They just don't want to do it. There isn't that feeling. These kids today I think are
21 a lot smarter than we were where they question everything. They question the government. It isn't
22 easy to get things through anymore with these kids. They are so much on the ball. Right now
23 President Bush is trying to push through [private] Social Security. These kids don't want nothing to
24 do with it. You know, they know I get a check every month, that's what they want. They don't want
25 to play the stock market. They don't want to have private accounts, they just don't want to do it.
26 They question it.

27 RV: You encourage them to question it?

28 AL: Yes, I always encourage my kids. When Ed Wargolet came to visit, Toby Campbell
29 and Duke Snyder and Ed Wargolet, they came to visit me in 1994. They wanted to go to Niagara
30 Falls and they spent maybe a weekend over here. We had a great time reminiscing about
31 Vietnam. They would talk to the kids and my sons, they couldn't believe the things that we did

1 (laughter). Because my father did this, and my father did that. By the way, he died about two
2 years ago of brain cancer.

3 RV: I'm sorry to hear that.

4 AL: A lot of the guys I was with close, they had different diseases and stuff when they
5 came back.

6 RV: So you all stuck together throughout all these years?

7 AL: Yes, still correspond too. One year we got together and last year we were supposed
8 to go to Philadelphia, a bunch of us, but I never made it. I had some family problems and my
9 sister, one of my sisters contracted breast cancer. She's all by herself, she never was married. So
10 I'd take her for chemo about once every couple of weeks. To a hospital in Buffalo here. So I've
11 got that responsibility and I take care of her because she has nobody.

12 RV: Well Tony is there anything else that you would like to add to our interview sessions?
13 Is there anything that you want to talk about?

14 AL: No, later on I think I'll go over the transcripts and see anything I wanted to change. I
15 think I covered just about everything. Our questions are excellent. You really jogged my memory
16 on a lot of things.

17 RV: Well thank you. I appreciate that.

18 AL: A good interviewer will do that.

19 RV: Well, I appreciate that. Let me go ahead and officially end the interview with Tony
20 LaRusso. Thank you very much, sir.

21 AL: Ok.